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The Web Of The Stars©

William Kern

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IN THIS ISSUE

The Web Of The Stars

THE WEBOF THE STARS

William Kern
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DEDICATION
This book is dedicated to all the people who believed without questioning.

THE WEB OF THE STARS

PREFACE

A cautionary note about the book.

The Web Of The Stars is not for everyone, particularly those with a narrow world view and limited experience with rough characters and hard life; that is, people who think the world is sunshine, pretty flowers, rainbows and Sunday school.

The narrative and dialogue are superbly written, revealing a command of language which is rare these days. The descriptions of the geography, flora and fauna are as hostile and sinister as they are uniquely beautiful and exquisite. You might be led to believe such places actually exist and that you are part of them.

The tale, for the most part, takes place on a Darkoid (planet) called Yoovellus. It has no central sun, hence, it is a dark oid. All light, even that required for the growing of plants, is artificial. There is no "daylight," only darkness. No sunrise, only darkness. Humans, robots, cyborgs and other intergalactic creatures and flora are implanted with devices that produce light by which to see, and lumoplasts to produce photosynthesis. Outside the boundaries of the cities, all is darkness inhabited by hostile and terrible creatures: the vampire warlords and pagan priests who control the tribes in the outlands. It is into this sinister blackness that our adventurers are thrust as they seek to open trade routes with the warlords.

But the heroes are not who they appear to be. Each is but an avatar clad in a Chameleon Suit, projected as a hologram into a hoverfield. The prime character at this point in the tale is Thovas Tho, a zealous follower of the Forerunner Lords who goes into the outlands to deliver catechisms to the heathen tribes. The hero/businessman, Zan Fadron, tags along as his "assistant and interpreter." This is nothing more than a staged ruse so rival businessmen cannot guess the true purpose of their clandestine mission. The real people never leave the chambers in which they are imprisoned as slaves of the powerful businessman/governor of the capital city who uses the prisoners to get a leg up on his rivals.

Calling upon his experiences in the military, the author begins and ends the

story with the first few lines of the first chapter when a fleet of nine military starships appears from Beta Ether to intercept and vaporize an alien Starship in a "sweet bath" of thermonuclear fire, killing its occupants in a few seconds. The rest of the 22-chapter vagabondage reveals why and how that occurred, and the consequences of the action.

It involves abduction, brain washing, mind-control, enslavement, cannibalism, nudity, voyeurism, murder, attempted murder, suicide, attempted rape, vampirism (the killing of animals and humans for the sole purpose of ingesting their blood), the killing of animals and the enslavement of humans solely for use as decorative "art," mass infanticide in The Web Of The Stars, pagan star worship, arson, zealous religious intolerance, and a lengthy and artfully written romantic interlude—the 25-year-old metropolitan businessman hero, Zan Fadron, with a nubile 13-year-old tribal girl. The tribe's females are expected to marry at age 13. He continues his affair with her with growing reluctance and eventually returns her to the city of her ancestors where she may live in freedom.

The story concludes with the destruction of the military fleet we encountered in the first chapter, the enslavement of survivors, and the annihilation or enslavement of the tribal warlords and their henchmen by powerful businessmen who want to establish Zeppelin routes into the hinterlands, not to end slavery, but to further and hasten the profits of their slave trade, gold trade and gems trade.

The last scene is of the emancipated conquering adventurers all sitting around a table in a bar in the port city enjoying themselves by watching slaves perform a dance on stage before an appreciative crowd.

As I say, it isn't for everyone but SciFi fans will love it!

William Kern

CHAPTER 1

Space near the strange starship ripped asunder. The twinkling of stars there came to a screeching halt. It began with a tiny shimmer. The phenomenon of photon death transformed it into an ugly knot of wicked blackness. Like the metastasis of cancer, it rapidly spread to become nine wicked knots. Any quantum scanner would have seen the maw of a raging funnel in each of nine bolls of darkness.

Out of each maw stumbled a capital ship of the line, crews struggling to overcome the severe mental sluggishness caused by the quantum flux in a transspacial funnel.

A Praying Mantis catapulted from the bow of each ship. At launch, a Praying Mantis was a globe. Like a jack-in-a-box it explosively unfolded in space to form a hideous pseudocreature twice as tall as a ship. Each one's belly carried active and passive sensors which relayed back to the fleet.

The ghastly insectoids rushed ahead, accelerating at two hundred Gs, veer-

ing hard on a trajectory to intercept the mysterious vessel.

Seconds later, all fire control systems on the Praying Mantises switched from standby to active. From the mouth of each monster belched explosion-pumped Electro Magnetic Pulses from a nuclear powered Gatling gun. Each Gatling was automatically loaded at the breech with nuclear cartridge bombs. Each had thirteen barrels, and could fire a nuclear EMP once every two seconds until the magazine of thirty cartridges was exhausted. In continuous rapid fire, the magazine emptied in exactly one minute.

These mighty fists of electromagnetism slammed through the vessel's shields, knocking out electrical systems, short-circuiting shield generators, and blinding the ship's sensors. Each beast had two eyes from which poured explosion-pumped X-ray lasers. Behind each eye was a globular containment field in which a nuclear device was detonated. Therefore the containment field held a compressed nuclear explosion in stasis. An aperture channeled the X-rays through the lens of the eye to fuel the laser. Eighteen X-ray lasers smote the unidentified ship. These short-range precision scalpels struck maliciously, scorching and slashing from bow to stern. They sliced into the vessel's weapon bays, crippling her particle beams and mangling her point defense. Not being material objects, the lasers cut through most of her force fields like a knife through melted butter. Thunderous explosions trembled throughout the ship, first in her bow, then into amidships, and finally astern. Deafening roars mingled with klaxons and echoed down her passageways. Rent metal screeched as her bulkheads flared and died. From countless hull-breeches, she streamed atmosphere into the void.

Each Praying Mantis had two forelimbs and two hindlimbs. Each forelimb contained a hundred ECM (Electronic Counter Measures) modules which had been rapidly launching. Each module radiated the fake EM (Electromagnetic) signature of one of the nine ships in the task force. The modules streaked away to fulfill their mission as decoys. Each hindlimb packed ten short-range TBMs (Tactical Ballistic Missiles).

Each missile was a nuke. Having come within range, all one hundred eighty TBMs tried to launch at once. One exploded on launch consuming in a huge flash the Mantis and its other nineteen missiles. Inside each of the remaining one hundred sixty missiles, magdars (MAGnetism Detection And Return) began their circular scans, searching for the target ship. All of the circular scans detected the target and switched to raster scan. Two seconds later, all but one raster scan became a terminal homer by switching to conical scan and locking on.

One TBM continued in raster scan, sailing past the target. One hundred fifty nine TBMs impacted the unknown vessel, enveloping her in a sweet bath of thermonuclear hellfire. Five seconds later, there arrived on the scene, eighteen long-range SBMs (Strategic Ballistic Missiles) which had been fired directly from the

ships of the task force, two missiles from each of the nine capital ships of the line. With spectacular fury, these missiles screamed inward to deliver a merciless, massive overkill, blowing the mysterious, uninvited, and very unwelcome visitor into a devil's holocaust of ions, pieces, and plasma. No quarter was asked; no quarter was given.

* * * * *

Most of the matter in the universe is not within solar systems, but in the darker regions of space between the solar systems. It is called "dark matter." Pieces of dark matter are oids of the dark, or darkoids. Some darkoids are as large as planets, and some are as small as asteroids. Beings who live or work among the dark matter are ools of the dark, or darkools. While there are exceptions, the general rule is that darkoids are not comets, meteoroids, planetoids, asteroids, planets, or moons. This is due to three reasons: Firstly darkoids do not orbit suns. Secondly darkoids do not usually pass by or through solar systems. Thirdly the concept of "traveling through outer space" is in the definition of "meteoroid.' A darkoid usually does not travel, or, at least it is not usually thought of as traveling. Of course there are exceptions.

The luscious calf of her shapely leg contracted, lifting her divine heel off the floor. She was single, extremely lonely, and twenty-four years old. She sat nude on a stool before a console. The sheer gorgeousness that was her leg began to vibrate up and down, powered by the rhythmic contractions of her fabulously toned muscles. It was just a harmless, nervous habit. She was curvaceously slender but not skinny. Her breasts were voluptuous but not excessive. They were magnificently sculptured, perky, and hard. From head to toe, she was one hundred percent natural.

She was exquisitely symmetrical and seven feet tall. With the greatest of ease, she could have been an intergalactic supermodel if she had only chosen that line of work. Instead, she was what her father had raised her to be: a darkoid miner. When he passed away, she inherited his mines on twenty-three darkoids.

She was twelve miles underground. She loved it there. Her habitat was small but quite cozy. She was not a nudist; she just happened to be stark naked when her sensor alarm sounded. Having finished her bath, she had been in the tornado dryer. She had been reaching for the off button when she heard the alarm. Her glorious, naturally blond hair was thick-bodied and shoulder-length. She always shampooed it five times every bath. She wanted hair that was oil-free. The tornado had left her hair with a powerful electrostatic charge. This static electricity caused the dry, clean hair to rise, floating about her head, giving her the look of an exotic goddess.

Her eyes were the shade of green found only in the most precious of Zaspian emeralds. The radiance of her sparkling eyes was peering into the scopes of her

console. The actual sensors were on the surface, twelve miles above her. At her fingertips were the waldoes and servos that controlled them. She positioned the cursor. "Dolca, what is that anomaly at the cursor?" she asked in a datavise to the Implunt (IMPLanted UNit) inside her body.

''Its ESM parameters suggest that it is the very beginning of the formation of a transit terminus,'' datavised the Implunt, Dolcha, in response.

"I see two more," said Finema Dova, puzzled.

''I'm now counting nine,'' answered Dolcha, ''in close proximity to each other. In view of the short distances between them, I advise you to expect a military formation to exit.''

"Can you detect any change in the unknown vessel?"

''Negative, however, notice how close the nine termini are to the unknown vessel. I deem it most probable that the initiators had the unknown vessel's precise coordinates.''

"Yes, but are the newcomers friends of the unknown vessel, or the cavalry come to rescue us?"

''Perhaps this is the first sign that your courier completed his mission.''

"Or, perhaps not. We should know in a moment. Pray it's the cavalry."

''I'm not programmed to pray, Finema Dova.''

"That's okay. I'm praying for us both."

The Darkool sat spellbound at her console's scopes, watching the events unfold, and when they were all over, tears were in her eyes. Her mind was suddenly flooded with thoughts and memories of her dear father. She missed him terribly. If only he were still alive to help her make sense of all this.

"But Dolcha, they didn't even try to hail the unknown vessel. They didn't even try to ask the vessel's crew what their business here was. Instead, the cavalry just murdered... ."

Dolcha maintained a lonely silence. The loneliness of that silence was felt not by the Implunt, Dolcha, but by the Darkool, Finema Dova.

CHAPTER 2

Vosos Vos was utterly exhausted. He had been without sleep for three days and three nights. With effort, he refrained from staggering when he stepped onto the afterbrow. ''Permission to disembark,'' he requested to the OOD (Officer of the Deck).

''You look ten sheets to the quasar, sailor,'' responded the OOD, hesitating.

''I'm fine, sir,'' lied Vosos Vos, holding his salute tightly and respectfully.

''Permission granted,'' reluctantly answered the OOD, returning the salute at

last.

Vosos Vos finished the salute, breathed out heavily, and walked down the gangplank from the spaceship to the dirt of the planet. This was his first visit to the famous planet, Argonus. His vessel was only going to be here for twelve hours. Vosos Vos was not about to spend his twelve hours of liberty alone in a rack. Argonus's only spaceport, Argon, was legendary among spacemen for its wild bars, wild zenocs, wild cyborgs, wild robots, wild men, and wild women. He hailed a hovertaxi and headed for downtown. It was not far. The whole spaceport was a small town. One could walk from one end of town to the other in an hour. Argon was the only metropolis on Argonus.

Downtown was wall-to-wall bars. He paid the driver and exited the hovertaxi. He stood on the sidewalk, astounded by the endless sea of holographic signs that lunged from the buildings into the air above the streets. A nearby hologram beckoned him. It read, ''Clockwise Counterclockwise.''

On each side was a clock with hands moving fast. One clock's hands were moving in the wrong direction. He staggered towards it. He pushed open the saloon doors and stumbled inside. He looked around. The place was almost full. He saw an empty stool at the bar and headed straight for it. He sat down. Out of the bar's surface popped a hologram of a bartender's head. ''Gentlehomo, welcome. What may I have the honor to serve you?'' uttered the holohead politely.

''How much is hot Fligsidian Coffee?'' enquired Vosos Vos.

''Two pulsars and fifty singularities, Gentlevir.''

''I'll have two, please,'' he requested, glancing at the Ophidian on the stool to his left who had no drink. ''Wait a moment.''

"Bring up the Ophidian Interpreter," he ordered his Mindplus. ''Mindplus'' was a brand name of a line of Implunts. Ophidian Interpreter holo deployed, complied the Mindplus, as a holohead of an Ophidian materialized just above Vosos Vos' left shoulder. "Excuse me, Gentlehomo," he transmitted through the Interpreter. The holo was not just a holo; the projector had a limited matter-projection capability. The holohead's forked tongue began spewing the airborne chemicals that serve to carry communication for Ophidians. Ophidians have no ears and are deaf. They have no vocal cords.

A hologram of a human head appeared next to the head of Vosos Vos's neighbor to the left, projected by the neighbor himself. ''Yes, Gentlehomo,'' promptly spoke the human holohead.

"May I have the honor of buying you a drink?"

''I'd be delighted! I'll have Zaspian Angel Nectar, if you don't mind,'' stated the Ophidian, warmly accepting.

''How much is one of those?'' Vosos Vos asked the bartending holohead.

‘‘Same price as your drink, Gentlevir.’’

‘‘Two of them for my neighbor, please,’’ ordered Vosos Vos.

‘‘Coming right up,’’ courteously nodded the holohead.

A live zenoc bartender arrived shortly with his robot companion. The zenoc served the drinks that the robot had carried over, but the robot accepted the money and made change.

Vosos Vos and his neighbor to the left began to sip their drinks.

"Wow, your Implunt has great resolution and fabulous sound quality!" exclaimed Vosos Vos, "Is that a Mindplus?"

‘‘No. It’s the latest Zenotron. I just bought it yesterday. It was extremely expensive, but since I’m looking for a job, I thought it would look good on my resume. What do you think?’’

"I’d hire you in a flash," complimented Vosos Vos warmly. "I apologize for the inferior quality of my Mindplus piece of junk."

‘‘It’s not so bad, actually; quite sufficient,’’ tolerated the Ophidian.

"What type of job are you after?"

‘‘Assistant astrogator is what I like the most,’’ answered the Ophidian.

"That happens to be my favorite work as well. My ship needs one. We blast off in eleven hours. Are you interested?"

‘‘Yes,’’ nodded the Ophidian firmly.

"Hold on a second, and I’ll see if my Mindplus will raise the ship from here." Almost instantly he had the OOD on the datalink. In front of Vosos Vos’ face, the Ophidian projected a hologram of his discharge papers from his last ship. Vosos Vos read key quotes to the OOD who hired the Ophidian on the spot, although Vosos Vos had to put up a bond for him because the Ophidian was broke.

"Do you know why this bar is called ‘Clockwise Counterclockwise’?"

‘‘It just so happens that I do know. This bar is the only bar in Argon which often changes its name. It changes its name every week. It’s known as the Bar of the Everchanging Name, or simply ‘Everchanging’. I was here today at zero eight hundred hours when the owner was hiring a new dancer. He promptly renamed the bar Clockwise Counterclockwise in honor of her.

"Is that her name?" Vosos Vos enquired, puzzled.

‘‘It’s her pseudonym. Not even the owner knows her real name. She’s up next on Island Three,’’ he said, pointing his forked tongue to the far right island. ‘‘After you see her, I’ll let you take a guess as to why she chose that pseudonym for herself.’’

Vosos Vos swiveled his stool around to gaze at Island Three. An eight-foot-tall, sapient Octopus was dancing the beat of the blaring space rock. On Island Two, a female android was gyrating around a fire pole. She was one of those rare, exor-

bitantly expensive, sexy models. Vosos wondered if perhaps many women disliked her out of jealously. On Island One, a six foot-tall Ophidian was swaying rhythmically to the music.

"Is the Ophidian dancer a female?"

‘‘Absolutely yes,’’ nodded his neighbor with enthusiasm.

"May I ask please which sex you are?" he humbly questioned, not wishing to offend.

‘‘Male,’’ responded the Ophidian without offense, ‘‘and you?’’

"Male also," he hastened, blushing red. "I take it she’s attractive?"

‘‘She is very lovely, but very expensive to buy drinks for. I know; I’ve bought quite a few for her, before I ran out of money.

"How much to buy a drink for a dancer?"

‘‘Fifty pulsars.’’

"That is stiff," mused Vosos Vos, "however, I’ll pay for one that you may have with her."

‘‘Kind Gentlevir, thank you very much. You are so very generous to me.’’

"Well I guess you are the only friend I have on this whole planet."

‘‘Then you accept me as a friend.’’

"I do; do you accept me as friend?"

‘‘I do,’’ consented the Ophidian.

Vosos Vos let his eyes rove over the numerous spectators. About ninety percent of them were zenocs, cyborgs, or robots. About ten percent were human. Vosos Vos mumbled to himself, ‘‘I guess smoking is permitted here,’’ astounded by the multicolored clouds of smoke being exhaled by beings of all varieties. They were smoking who-knows-what in this nearly lawless spaceport.

The song ended. The pause was a few seconds. Each dancer exited her Island by walking a long runway to curtains behind the Islands. As a new song began, the curtains parted to reveal the human girl for Island Three, for whom the bar had been named. The song had a beautiful, fast beat. His eyes widened! His jaw dropped! He drew in a quick, deep breath. He felt his pulse pound in his temples. Unknowingly he had placed his hand upon his heart.

Out of the curtains came the most gorgeous human female that he had ever had the pleasure of laying eyes upon. She wore a thin, blue, silk camisole that descended to almost her navel. She wore a matching, blue, silk, short skirt. The silk was not see-through, but it was so light, thin, and clinging, that it might as well have been see-through, as revealing as it was. Although fast-beat, the song had lyrics of passion and love. It was deeply romantic.

As he saw her walk up the runway to her Island, suddenly he knew why the bar’s name was in her honor. The natural, graceful, fluid movements of her body

created a Coriolis force that gyrated one of her breasts in a clockwise rotation, while simultaneously gyrating the other breast in a counterclockwise rotation. The clinging silk of the camisole greatly multiplied the mesmerizing effect of the counter rotations. He had never in his life seen any human body movement so unique, so lovely, so hypnotizing. "This is not a human," spoke a voice deep in his subconscious. "It is an angel."

He felt a flash go through his mind and body. He felt a moment of dead reckoning, a precognition of profound certainty, an instant of pure clarity, an experience of divine revelation. He felt a feeling that many people live out their entire lives without ever having. He instantly knew something about his future. Without the shadow of a doubt, he knew. This was the first time he had ever known anything about his personal future with this degree of force and deep conviction. He knew that for as long as he would live, that he would always love this woman.

And that he would never love another.

The song ended. Her dance had been elegant and in very good taste. With grace, she walked the runway and exited through the curtains. After a few seconds hiatus, the loud music began anew with a very different song. Three new performers parted the curtains. But, in his mind's eye he could only see visions of her. He swiveled around and finished drinking his coffee. A psychic nudge caused him to look aside at a far table. It was her! She was sitting down alone at a small table for two.

A young boy came through the saloon doors and looked around. He saw her and walked up to her table. With his left hand, he laid a piece of folded paper on her table in front of her. With his right hand, he laid a tiny object on the table. It looked like a pill. She gave him money and he left. She took the wrapping off the tiny object and put the object into her mouth. With a drink from her glass, she swallowed it. She unfolded the paper and glanced at it for a moment before refolding it and replacing it on the table. She set her glass on the corner of it.

Three patrolmen entered through a curtain behind her. In a lightning-swift movement, one patrolman pulled out a stun wand and touched it to the back of her neck. In the same instant, the other two men grabbed her by the wrists. She slumped into unconsciousness as the men pulled her from the room through the same way they had entered. Vosos Vos threw a quick glance at the zenoc bartender. The zenoc had been bending over under the counter and had obviously seen nothing. Vosos Vos glanced all around. He could see no one that had taken notice enough to get up and do something. Vosos Vos got up, walking quickly over towards the curtains. Passing the table, he reached down and pocketed the folded piece of paper. He parted the curtains and stepped quickly inside. He never saw what hit him.

Vosos Vos opened his eyes, struggling to focus his vision. He looked around.

He recognized his surroundings. He was lying in an autodoc in his ship's Infirmary. The autodoc's encephalograph noticed that he had awakened and automatically summoned the ship's corpsman.

"Well," exclaimed the corpsman, "welcome back to the universe of the wide-awake! How do you feel?"

"I feel like a ship landed on me," groaned Vosos Vos, "How much liberty time do I have left?"

"None," laughed the corpsman, "we've already taken off. We're in space now. The new Ophidian crewman carried you back to the ship. I don't know the details. You'll have to ask him. I was on liberty the whole twelve hours. The autodoc found a strong sedative in your blood and neutralized it. I'll authorize eight more hours of bed rest. After that, you'll have to resume work."

The next day found Vosos Vos and his new found Ophidian friend, Zah Kah'than, sitting in a booth together in Compartment Z-4500. They were eating, talking, and gazing out the viewport at the stars rushing by. Of course, they were both conversing through their interpreter holoheads.

"I left my stool," explained Zah Kah'than, via his floating, human holohead, "and followed you. I passed through the curtains to find you face down on the floor. The man who had stun-wanded Clockwise Counterclockwise was bending over you. It looked like he was about to search your pockets when the venom I spat hit him in the eyes. He ran out the back entrance. I did not pursue. I was shaking you, trying to rouse you, but I did not succeed. Through the floor, my scales felt the vibrations of a vehicle in the alley, rapidly accelerating away. I did not see the vehicle. Via my Zenotron, I summoned the hovertaxi of a friend of mine. We brought you to the ship. I got the ship's name from the tag on your necklace. I had him wait at the ship with the meter running. I carried you aboard. The OOD had someone help me carry you, and we put you in the infirmary's autodoc. As soon as I felt you were safe, I went ashore again. My friend drove me to my room. I packed and checked out. I had my friend datavise the office of the local Patrol. Here's what they said: Instantly a hologram of a view screen appeared in the air in front of Vosos Vos' face. On the view screen was the head and shoulders of a uniformed Patrolman, saying: "I assure you we have not made an arrest in The Bar of the Everchanging Name since about six months ago. We have arrested no female in all of Argon in over a week. They were probably bounty hunters. They sometimes wear Patrol uniforms when they're making arrests. There is no law against it. Argonus has no written laws. This spaceport's crawling with bounty hunters."

"Thank you!" said Vosos Vos with great warmth, "thank you for everything, my friend."

"May I ask you, Vosos Vos, why you followed Clockwise Counterclockwise?"

Vosos Vos felt his face flush. "Because I fell in love with her when I first saw her walking on that runway," he confessed, humiliated that he had fallen for a woman with whom he had not even spoken. "Do Ophidians ever fall in love at first sight?"

Zah Kah'than hissed and said. ''I imagine we Ophidians fall in love at first sight, just about as often as you humans do. May I tell you something in strict confidence,'' asked Zah Kah'than.

"Certainty," assured Vosos Vos.

''I've spent the last year in Argon. It's a very small spaceport,'' uttered Zah Kah'than enigmatically, following with a long, dramatic pause.

"And?" puzzled Vosos Vos.

''When my friend and I arrived at your ship with you, I saw a large hovertruck unloading cargo for your ship. I recognized the driver. I assure you that the only cargoes he delivers are sapient slaves. This ship is a slaver. Were you aware of that?''

The color drained from the face of Vosos Vos, as his lower jaw fell agape. "No, I didn't know," he responded, astonished.

''I regret to inform you that this is not the first slaver that I've found myself employed on. I've learned from that. If this captain finds out that we know there are slaves aboard, then he may fire us. Captains fear sabotage from crewmen who sympathize with the antislavery movement. Therefore, they restrict the knowledge on a ''need to know'' basis. Almost all of the crew is not deemed to have the ''need to know.'' Those that do have ''the need to know'' get a percentage of the slave profits for slaving and for keeping silent about it. When you were still in the autodoc, I secretly entered the cargo hold and inspected the slaves. All of the slaves are completely naked, standing erect in transparent stasis fields. They are in rank-and-file rows. One may walk between the rows and clearly view all parts of their bodies. There are a thousand slaves there. I carefully viewed all of them, among other reasons, to see if Clockwise Counterclockwise was among them. She was not. Of course, that doesn't preclude her from being a slave in some other ship or place.''

"May I tell you something in strict confidence?" asked Vosos Vos, reaching into his pocket.

''Of course,'' consented Zah Kah'than.

Vosos Vos pulled out a piece of folded paper. "Look at this."

With his forked tongue, Zah Kah'than unfolded the piece of paper. He read it and said: ''it's a receipt for a swallowable interstellar tracking device for sapients. It has the agent's name, the manufacturing company's name, and the device's serial number. The buyers name is machine printed: Uma Floralhaven. This is what you picked up from her table, isn't it?''

"Yes, the boy left it with the device which she promptly swallowed. How did you get into a locked cargo hold?"

‘‘I’m not at liberty to say, but I’m not without certain clandestine talents; shall we say?’’

"What did you mean by ‘‘among other reasons?’’"

‘‘Twenty-five Zaspian years ago, I was repairing mining robots when I met someone very special. I fell deeply in love. We saw each other twice. I had decided that on our next meeting, I would ask her to be my mate. That meeting never came to pass. Her ship was lost in deep space. No one knows what happened. No sign has ever come to light. Who knows, but perhaps they were seized by pirates and sold as slaves. Hence, I always walk through slave markets every chance I get to see if she is there. My friend, now you know the cause of my wanderlust. Is it not quite similar to your own cause?’’

They paused for a while. They looked out the viewport. The stars were magnificent to see, especially the near ones as they flashed by. A breathtaking binary, with the wildest array of colors, sailed slowly past.

CHAPTER 3

At rest, Deepspace Webmaster Fo’hex was twenty feet wide, two feet tall at the dorsal plate, and four feet tall at the knees. She was a deep, dark black in color and looked much like a gigantic Terran tarantula which she certainly was not.

Fo’hex opened one eye. Then she opened seven more eyes. Now, all eight of her eyes were open, but barely. She felt the tingle and cringed. This tingle was very recognizable but acutely unpleasant. It swept through the nerves of her cephalothorax, down her eight legs, and into her eight graspers. It was the pins-and-needles of neuroelectric agony that one always suffered when coming out of the suspended animation of null tau. As required for the rank of Deepspace Webmaster, Fo’hex carried on her body a quarkonic, miniature null tau generator. It could project a null tau field in a programmable shape. For everything inside this field, time stood still. The generator itself was outside the field and had an automatic timer which would shut off the field at a preset time and date; unless someone outside the field shut it off first.

" W-H-Y H-A-V-E I B-E-E-N A-W-A-K-E-N-E-D ? " she datavised very groggily to Okton. Okton was an AI (Artificial Intelligence). He was programmed with a masculine persona. He was the dominant one of the eight male AIs which were inside Fo’hex’s body. They augmented her axonics, and were embedded into her chiton in eight different locations. These AIs were built from the science of quarkonics which made for much smaller machines that did the science of nanotechnology. When she was outside null tau, they helped her run her web, which included her ship. Her internal AIs could do no work when she was in null

tau. Being within the field, time stood still for them as well.

The cold solitude of deep space combined with Fo'hex's innate femininity to cause her, even in this dreary, lethargic state, to yearn for the masculine tone of Okton's datavise. The "powers that be" chose to implant into deepspace webmasters, AIs of a sexual nature opposite the sexual nature of their Webmaster. Hence, a female Webmaster would only be implanted with male AIs and vice versa. The purpose was twofold: First, it was to help solitary hunters conquer the miserable loneliness of the void.

Second, it was to honor and perpetuate tribal traditions. Historically, Fo'hex's folk had once been two separate jungle tribes. Plague and warfare wiped out all of the males of one tribe and all of the females of the neighboring tribe. The two tribes merged, speaking mutually unintelligible languages. Both languages were tonal. The tones were phonemic; a change in the tone of a word could produce a change in the meaning of the word.

The male offspring grew up speaking the male language, while understanding, but not speaking, the female language. The females were raised to converse only in the female tongue, and never in the male tongue, which they fluently could comprehend, of course. Adult males spoke male to adult females. Adult females spoke female to adult males. Each understood the other but would never respond in the other's language. Opposite-sex language was taboo to speak, not by law, but by custom. This tribe grew and eventually rose to dominate the entire planet of O'flept.

With silent joy, Fo'hex felt the sensual masculine pitch of Okton's datavise: "Webmaster, a vessel has broken through eight subwebs on a trajectory which may allow an attempt at capture. Your standing orders are to reactivate you in such a contingency," he transmitted in response to her question, having just downloaded a full report from Shipokton.

Webmaster Fo'hex commanded a second set of male AIs which were outside of her body, since they were part of her ship's standard machinery. They ran the web any time Fo'hex was in null tau. The ship's correspondent to Okton was named Shipokton. The web consisted of eight thousand subwebs that crisscrossed this vast region of space. A thread of this web was not the same type of thread that the tribe spun in the jungle. A spaceweb's thread was made of tachyon-vortex-weave technology. O'fleptians believed it to be invisible to all but special O'fleptian sensors. It was unwise to have a web in one spot for too long. Prior to entering null tau, Fo'hex had just finished excreting this brand new web which had not yet captured a single prey. She had selected this spot because it was across a known shipping channel. Null tau provided a way to endure the long waits between the arrivals of prey.

"Inject me with a stimulant," she ordered weakly, frustrated at her inability to

snap out of it on her own.

"Aye Aye, Webmaster, medical package gamma, a complex stimulant, entering your hemolymph at this time," datavised Okton, complying with her order. AIs, unlike living beings, wake up from null tau instantaneously. Living tissues need a few moments to get up to speed. Involuntarily she felt her eight eyes widen, as a flood of vibrant mental acuity rushed through her eight brains. One brain was dominant, the others were subsidiary, unless the dominant brain became incapacitated, in which case, a subsidiary brain would take over.

"How long have I been in null tau?" asked Fo'hex.

"Madam, Shipokton has just sent me the standard reactivation data package. May I transmit it now?"

"Pump it!" quipped Fo'hex in a fast response. A datastream surged into her axonics, allowing her eight brains to simultaneously receive such vital things as: the current date, time elapsed while in null tau, reason to awaken her, and the status of her web. Fo'hex learned that she had been in null tau for two revolutions. Fo'hex had never heard of Terra. Her homeworld was the planet O'flept. Of course she had no idea of how long a Terran year was but, if she had known, she could have calculated that two O'fleptian revolutions were equal to 3.2 Terran years, one O'fleptian revolution being equal to 1.6 Terran years.

"Is the prey's speed preterluminal?" She was asking a question which she already knew the answer to, since she had received the intruder's speed in the Data Package which Okton had just finished datavising. This redundancy was intentional on her part. It was wise to double-check a little because an AI could become damaged. Furthermore, Fo'hex dearly loved to occasionally ask questions which she already had the answers to. It made solitude more pleasant. Plus it helped keep herself on her pseudo-toes. Just because it was beamed into her memory, did not always mean that her recall of it was correct. Her natural memory was very good but not perfect. As with any living being, errors occurred. The artificial memory of her axonics was usually much more error-free than her natural memory; but, as with any technology, errors did sometimes happen. Nothing was perfect.

"Affirmative, but the prey is not so fast that you can't catch them, ma'am."

"Project a hologram of the prey with my web." Instantly a very sophisticated holographic display surrounded her. It looked as if she was viewing her web from her present position in space. The intruding vessel was represented by an icon. The icon was glowing, pulsating, and was labeled with a symbol which might translate as "Alpha."

"Are these edible prey in icon Alpha?"

"Aye, Webmaster. Five hundred and twenty-three binocs." The term "binoc" was a short form of the word "binocular." The "bi" meant "two." The "ocular"

meant ‘‘eye.’’ In the eight-eyed O’fleptian mindset, the term ‘‘binoc’’ referred not to an instrument but, rather, to any living creature with two eyes. Fo’hex’s voluminous salivary glands began to writhe with peristalsis. She was famished. She loved to feast on binoc flesh. On O’flept, binoc was a very rare and highly treasured delicacy. The tastiest binoc piece was the brain. The higher the binoc’s IQ (Intelligence Quotient), the tastier was its brain. A sapient binoc was a special treat.

"Do you have ident on icon Alpha?"

"Affirmative, Madam, it appears to be of a nationality of binocs known as Quelsians from the planet Quels, found in the fifth spiral arm of this galaxy. Their oral and written language is in our data base. The prey’s official name is the Quelsian Civilian Ship, Zanzibar. Its Electromagnetic signature is that of a known type of Quelsian commerical freighter."

"Query: Weapons systems in prey?"

"Two combat Hornets, attached as remoras. Four laser cannons. Two missile tubes, each with five missiles, madam."

"Besides that, does icon Alpha have any type of superior or unknown technology that might be a danger?"

"Not that I know of, madam."

"How’s their Electronic Warfare capability?"

"Madam, the average Quelsian freighter of this class is documented to have poor EW systems, but I have no data on the Zanzibar specifically."

"Launch pursuit course. Bring standard capturing systems on line."

"Webmaster, Shipokton has already executed both. He did them at the same time as he triggered your reactivation."

"Good job," praised the Webmaster. "What percentage faster than the prey does he have me traveling?"

"Madam, one thousand eight hundred-fifty percent faster than the prey."

"Query: Time to intercept?"

"Six hours and five minutes, madam," responded Okton, using O’fleptian units of time.

"Is there any sign they’ve spotted me?"

"Negative, Webmaster."

"Are we still in Alpha Ether?"

"Affirmative, madam."

"Transit to Beta."

"Aye Aye, madam, metamorphosing to Beta Ether at this time." If there had been eyes watching Webmaster Fo’hex’s vessel, those eyes would have just seen the vessel vanish. Her ship was still there, but it could be neither seen nor heard,

nor felt by any normal living being if that living being was physically located in Alpha Ether.

"How many threadends are attached to icon Alpha?"

"All eight of the broken strands appear to have thoroughly anchored in the prey's hull, madam."

"Wonderful! How many threads does Shipokton have passing through my axis?" By the expression "my axis," Fo'hex was referring to the axis of Fo'hex's vessel which was a hollow space open to vacuum. It ran down the center of the ship from forward to aft. When the ship was properly landed on a planet, the axis was from the top of the ship to the bottom.

"Shipokton tractored three threadlines through our axis. All three are currently in the axis, one for you to circumvortex and two standbys."

"Thank you."

The Webmaster brought several of her axonic packages on line. One established a Lu'zeltian force field around her body. It functioned like a combination of a spacesuit, a suit of armor, and a ship's hull. Among other things, it contained a strength-enhancing molecular integrity field which fortified over a billion-fold any outlying body tissue such as integument, hair, chiton, corneas, etc. Another package brought her quarkonic air generators on line. These were in her lungs and were much too tiny to be seen or felt. Another brought her quarkonic rebreathers on line which converted Carbon Dioxide to Oxygen in the lungs. She sent an order to her quarkonic nutrition generators. They floated like islands in her hemolymph but were too small to be seen by a standard microscope.

They began pumping nutritional substances into her hemolymph. Even water was pumped in. Drinking was not necessary. She ordered her sensors to activate and ran a quick test by sending a sensory streamer outside the ship. Sensory units were embedded in her chiton and elsewhere in various places. They were too miniaturized to be seen or felt. Fo'hex ran a diagnostic program on all her activated axonic packages. Everything passed the program's examinations.

"You know what to do when we overtake the prey, don't you?" questioned the Webmaster via one of her notoriously unnecessary questions.

"Affirmative, madam."

"I shall nap now. Awaken me at the right time."

"Aye Aye, madam." She closed her eight eyes and almost instantly drifted off into a healing sleep. Not many hours later Okton delivered the wake up call:

"Awaken, Webmaster Fo' Hex, awaken!"

The Webmaster's eight eyes opened. She felt refreshed and renewed. Via axonics, she sent a message to open the forward airlock. She entered it, ordering the hatch to close behind her. She ordered the airlock's air to be sucked into the

ship.

"A full vacuum has been reached in this airlock, madam," informed Okton.

"Open the outer airlock," she commanded. The sphincter cycled without a sound. She crawled out into the Beta Ether of outer space. Inside her ship, a chime sounded. Shipokton spoke out loud for the first time since his commander's reactivation: ''Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex, departing.''

Outside, Fo'hex took a deep breath and felt deep gratitude to the inventors of her in-lung air generators. She let her gaze sweep thoroughly over the ship's exterior, diligently looking for any aberration. Four of her graspers each found a rung to grasp. These rungs were so numerous on the hull that hardly a three-foot circle could be found that did not have a rung on it. The rungs were not welded onto the hull. They were magnolocked onto it. Shipokton routinely removed them prior to entering a planet's atmosphere. Grasping rung after rung, she quickly reached the mouth of the ship's axis on the nose of the ship.

"Raise the Climber."

"Webclimber raised, functional and warmed up, madam," responded Okton after the lenticular webclimber had risen out of the ship axis. It looked like a flying saucer and was only slightly larger than Fo'hex's body. She mounted the climber, activating the controls with her graspers. A host of automatic functions instantly executed. Two Lu'zeltian force fields merged. The webclimber was a multipurpose deepspace vehicle. It, too, had an axis. The same three threadlines that were passing through it were also passing through the ship's axis.

"Have we decelerated and matched speed with the prey?"

"Aye, Webmaster."

When an intruding ship passed through a web, hopefully a very long threadline broke from the web with one threadend clinging to the vessel. The other threadend trailed the vessel, dangling in space. The Webmaster's ship used a tractor beam to grab the loose, dangling threadend and bring it to the mouth of the axis. The axis was a hollow tube. If the threadend was the first threadend to arrive at the mouth, it was met with a neutrino funnel which sucked it into and through the hollow axis of both the webclimber and the ship. Repulsor fields radiated from the axis-tube's wall to help prevent the threadline from touching the wall of the axis. This process was known as ''circum-vortexing'' the threadline. Only the first threadline was circumvortexed. If the threadline was not the first to arrive, then tractor beams, radiating from the mouth of the axis pulled the threadend into the mouth. Numerous short tractor beams, radiating from the entire length of the inside wall of the axis, pulled the threadline through the axis and prevented it from touching the elongated neutrino funnel that ran the length of the axis. Circumvortexing provided a much gentler pull than did tractoring, thus decreasing the chance of breakage. Although tractoring pulled more roughly on the threadline, it took up

much less space than did a funnel. Only the circumvortexed thread autosteered the craft toward the prey. Such autosteering provided a much stealthier approach, since active sensors need not radiate to locate the prey. Radiating active sensors could warn the prey and result in catastrophic retaliation. Even more important, autosteering enabled stalking the prey when the stalker was in Beta Ether but the prey was in Alpha Ether. In such a situation, except at very close ranges, the prey was invisible and undetectable by non-Lu'zeltian methods. Furthermore, such autosteering rendered useless even the most sophisticated EW or ECM deception and decoy methods that the prey might employ.

In the instant case, eight threadends had clung to the prey. Thus eight very long strands had trailed behind the ship, each with a loose threadend dangling in space. Three of these loose, dangling threadends had been tractored to the mouth via powerful long-range tractor beams.

One thread was circumvortexed through the axis to provide autosteering. Two threads were tractored through the axis to provide extras if the first one broke. The webclimber could fly through space with or without a threadline, but if no threadline was in the axis, no autosteering would be had.

Fo'hex paused for a moment to perform an old ritual, saying thanks to Lu'zelt. His scientific inventions made possible the life-style of the deepspace solitary hunter. Lu'zelt's two most important inventions were the Lu'zeltian force field, and the Lu'zeltian tachyon-vortex-weave technology.

The tachyon-vortex-weave provided two deepspace tools: the preterluminal sensor streamer, and the threadline. Inside her body, Fo'hex had two sets of spinnerets; her natural set and her artificial set. Her natural set spun webs in the jungles of planets. Her artificial set spun webs in deep space. The artificial spinnerets spun a threadline composed of a tachyon-vortex-weave. Lu'zelt found a way to create a hollow vortex of whirling tachyons. He discovered a way of making the whirling motion of the tachyons last for a very long time, almost permanently. Then he invented a method of drastically elongating the vortex to such great lengths that the vortex resembled a very long hollow thread. He then wove these threads together to form a longer and stronger thread, much like the weave of many natural threads and ropes made from the fibers of plants. But Lu'zelt didn't stop there. He wanted a thread that could metamorphize between Alpha and Beta Ethers and still be useful. To solve this dilemma, he fabricated a weave consisting half of vortices of Alpha-Ether tachyons and half from vortices made from Beta-Ether tachyons. Thus in either Ether only half of the vortices would seem to vanish and the woven strand would still be usable. Then came the task of devising Alpha-Ether anchors which would embed themselves into the hull of prey. For this, he installed from place to place along each thread a cluster of non-elongated thick-bodied vortices made only from Alpha-Ether tachyons. Thus the strands would

cling to a ship in Alpha Ether, but would not cling to a hull if the hull was in Beta Ether. In Alpha Ether, these clusters would lodge in the hulls of intruding ships and instantly start dragging the threadline behind the ship. These vortex-weave threadlines had neither weight nor inertia. They were neither pure energy nor pure matter. They were in between energy and matter. More correctly, the vortex-weave structure gave to the energy a slight pseudomatter characteristic.

In other words, the vortex-weave had mostly the qualities of faster-than light energy, but just a tiny bit of the qualities of matter. In the jungles of a planet, an O'fleptian would excrete a natural threadline to build a natural web. A natural web's threadline had the strength to pull an object. A vortex-weave threadline had no strength to pull any object. It only had the strength to pull itself. Fo'hex's vessel could circumvortex, follow, or accompany a rapid-moving vortex-weave threadline, but neither she nor her vessel could ever be pulled by one.

Fo'hex looked out into space in the direction of the prey but saw nothing but the blackness of the void, dotted with the twinkles of distant stars.

"Activate Alpha periscope."

"From Beta Ether to Alpha Ether vision apparatus online, madam." The device was buried in the retinas of all eight of her eyes. Suddenly she could see a semi-transparent ghost of a spaceship. The resolution of the periscope was very poor, but it was much better than nothing.

"Take an image of a ship of its class from the data base, and project it as a hologram in the middle of my field of vision."

"Webmaster, do you see the hologram?"

"Yes. Good work." She compared the hologram to the ghostlike version of the prey. She could now clearly see the justification for Okton's eval. The ship had only very minor variances with the class model. "I've confirmed class," she transmitted into her log. She could just barely make out the writing on the hull of the prey. It read: QUELSIAN CIVILIAN SHIP ZANZIBAR. "Confirmed name," she logged.

She gunned the throttle and accelerated rapidly toward the vessel with great confidence that the prey had not the slightest apprehension of the calamity that was about to unfold upon them.

''Tasty Binoc!'' she hissed aloud with great anticipation. The viscid fluid in her voluminous salivary glands began vigorous effervescence. From the ducts of venom sacks, vile, bubbling foam began to ooze and seep their neurotoxins and hemotoxins down the length of her fangs.

CHAPTER 4

The Darkoid, Yoovellus, had only one tiny, miserable spaceport. It was the darkoid's only city. It was called Lapis Lazuli, named after the bluish, violet gem-

stone that was one of Yoovellus' prized exports. In Lapis Lazuli, a hovertaxi driver spoke to his two fares, "... I know the address," he said. "There's hardly any darkool in all of this spaceport that doesn't know where Hoolk Venqueb's office is. He is the richest and most powerful darkool in Lapis Lazuli. He's by far the largest employer here. Even I work for him, on commission. He owns most of the hovertaxis in town. That ool owns numerous outfits; has his hands in almost everything, it seems. I sure don't envy him, though. The biggest mogul always gets assassinated here. Then his heir always takes over. History sure repeats itself around here."

"Is the air in this vehicle the same as the outside air?" queried Vosos Vos, wondering how the driver was surviving without an oxygen helmet. Due to Yoovellus' almost pure nitrogen atmosphere, both passengers had on oxygen helmets and were speaking through holoheads which were hovering next to the helmets.

"Yes," chuckled the driver, "I take it you haven't heard of a pulmonary oh-two unit?

"I guess not. What is it exactly?"

The driver explained: "A unit has parts so small that they fit in the alveoli of the lungs; gives you all the oh-two you need. It even heats and humidifies. One of Hoolk Venqueb's outfits sells it. It doesn't cost much, and it's worlds better than those cumbersome helmets. However, they absolutely will not let you off darkoid with it. Hoolk Venqueb refuses to export it, but they're easily removable."

"Which of Hoolk Venqueb's outfits is most lucrative," asked Zah Kah'than, curiously.

"I don't know," replied the driver, "I guess it'd be a toss up between the slave trade and the buying and selling of Forerunner artifacts. That's just a wild guess on my part." Vosos Vos and Zah Kah'than exchanged horrified glances.

"May I ask you, are you two good friends?" asked the driver.

"We are," answered Zah Kah'than.

"Is it hard to have one of us zenocs as a friend?" the driver asked Zah Kah'than who answered: "Well, I guess I cultivate zenocs as friends because it is a tenet of mine that no one of one's own species is worth talking to for more than sixty minutes. I go further and hold that it is indiscreet, if not immoral, to indulge in repeated conversations with any ool of one's own species. My reasoning on this point is this: Every normal ool desires in his conversations to entertain. When the interesting facts of his life are exhausted, which usually occurs well within the sixty-minute limit, the talker is apt to become quite tedious. However, when two ools meet who are zenoc to each other, their pasts are to each other virgin fields. It is unnecessary for them to unduly strain to be interesting. When one does, it is usually because his listener has exhibited listlessness or restlessness and he attempts to supply interest in the narrative by art. A good listener almost always

hears an intriguing tale; a bad listener demoralizes the most sincere man. I should say, if there be an afterlife in which the good and evil of our galactic existences are punished and rewarded, I should say that hell is paved with bad listeners. I, myself, try very hard to be a skillful listener.''

"Not long winded, either," interjected Vosos Vos. The three ools broke into laughter. The humor broke the ice. To the three it felt almost like they were all old friends.

''As a hovertaxi driver, I must ask you: Are you darkools?'' enquired the driver.

"Yes," responded Vosos Vos, "I spent a Zaspian year as a darkoid miner."

''And I,'' added Zah Kah'than, ''spent two years repairing mining robots on a darkoid, twenty-five years ago.''

''Well, that's good enough. On this darkoid, the general rule is that one must be on a darkoid for at least one year before one may call oneself a darkool. Do all your body cells have good nanobot heaters?''

"Mine do," replied Vosos Vos.

''Mine are okay,'' spoke up Zah Kah'than, ''I had a heater checkup recently. I well remember how cold it gets on a darkoid. Is there much natural water or ice here?''

''Almost none,'' informed the driver, ''The atmosphere and surface are very dry. That's why our pulmonary units humidify. That keeps the lungs from drying out.''

"Other than no oxygen, is there any other harm in breathing the atmosphere here?"

''Absolutely no harm,'' assured the driver, ''You may breath it as much and as hard as you like. You just won't get oh-two from it.''

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"Gentlevir, are you the Darkool, Hoolk Venqueb?" enquired Vosos Vos, standing beside Zah Kah'than.

''Indeed I am, Gentlehomoes, how may I be of service?'' answered the Nanotyranus. Although not genetically related, he looked a lot like the ancient Terran Tyranosaurus Rex and especially its smaller cousin, the Nanotyranosaurus, from which outsiders named Hoolk Venqueb's species. Originating from the planet, Zasp, Nanotyrani coexisted peacefully with other zenocs on many worlds.

"We were told that you were the official representative on this darkoid of this outfit," informed Vosos Vos, handing Hoolk Venqueb the folded piece of paper. Hoolk Venqueb reached out with one of his six-fingered truehands, took the paper, unfolded it, and read it.

''I am the local representative of over ten thousand companies. One moment while I consult my Implunt.'' After a pause, he began anew: ''Yes, Gentlehomoes,

I am this company's agent on Yoovellus. How may I help you?''

"Your company's rep on Zasp said you might be able to give us more information concerning the whereabouts and status of the ool who swallowed this tracking device," explained Vosos Vos.

''Said ool,'' began Zah Kah'than, ''is an adult human female. The Zaspian agent said the last blip matched the coordinates of this darkoid. So, we are here to ask you to please DF (Direction Finding) it more precisely, and tell us what you may. We just arrived on Yoovellus an hour ago. We've never been here before. We are very unfamiliar with things here, and your kind patience with us will meet with our most sincere gratitude.''

''Please follow me, Gentlehomoes,'' requested Hoolk Venqueb. They followed him into a large room which contained a wide variety of equipment, artifacts, supplies, and consoles. They halted before a machine near the back wall. Hoolk Venqueb manipulated the controls, entering the serial number from the folded paper. He pressed a button. Instantly a holo of the entire darkoid, Yoovellus, appeared in the air before them. A dot blinked. Next to the dot, glowed the word ''CRIPPLED,'' the coordinates, the date, and the time. Vosos Vos recorded the data into his Implunt, as did the other two ools. The date was two months and three days previously, which was the time it took Vosos Vos and Zah Kah'than to travel from the planet Zasp to the darkoid Yoovellus. Next to the blinking, crippled dot, was a dot that glowed but did not blink; it had the numeral ''3'' above it.

Hoolk Venqueb began to explain what he saw in the holo: ''The dots are all in the same spot, and mark the location of the last known position of the tracking device. The location is in an extremely remote area of Yoovellus. There are no roads leading there. Any flying craft would be shot down by zenocs long before it arrived there. To get there, one would have to mount an expedition and proceed overland. Equipping expeditions is one of the numerous hats I wear. I can equip you with everything you need to get there and back. However, since the zenocs who live there routinely kill all outsiders, your chance of ever returning would be slim to none. The number ''3'' indicates that since the crippled blip, there have been three normal blips.''

Hoolk Venqueb pressed another button. The holo vanished. Another holo appeared in its place. He continued to lecture: ''This is a view of the regions of interstellar space that the tracking device has traveled through. Each dot represents a blip caused by the tracking device radiating a momentary subspace signal. Notice that the holo program drew a line connecting these dots. These arrows show the direction of travel. The company informed me through my Implunt that this device first blips one hour after it is swallowed. The device has in-built locomotion. It quickly moves through the stomach, through the duodenum, and into the small intestine. It bores through the intestinal wall, entering a blood vessel. It trav-

els through the blood until it reaches a bone. It bores into the bone and lodges there, transmitting its first subspace signal. The tracking device is designed to transmit only two types of blips: the normal and the crippled. Normal blips only occur once per month at the scheduled time. The scheduled time is the monthly anniversary of the swallowing. Crippled blips may occur anytime a proper stimulus is encountered. They are not scheduled. You can see here that the first blip is on the planet Argonus. It is a normal blip. So, let's assume that she swallowed it on this day on Argonus. Only one blip occurs on Argonus. Thus we may conclude that, after she swallowed the blip, she was on Argonus for less than one month.

Otherwise a second blip would be there. Here is the next blip on a space lane between Argonus and the planet Quels. The trail leads next to a blip on Quels itself. The path leaves Quels and travels onto another space lane. Three normal blips occur, and then suddenly here's a crippled blip on the same space lane. So, we must assume she was in a ship in this space lane, when something happened to generate an unscheduled, crippled blip.

"So, what happened? Let me explain that a null tau generator produces a tiny range gate pulse that precedes the arrival of the field proper. The range gate pulse serves to polarize subatomic particles, which lays the groundwork for the arrival of the field proper. This particular tracking device had a range gate trigger built into it. Any range gate pulse would pull the trigger, instantly setting off an unscheduled, exceptionally fast, exceptionally short, and crippled signal. At the very least, this allows us to know where and when the ool entered the field, since the tracking device will not function at all while inside a null tau field. When the null tau field is released, the trigger is sprung once again, creating another crippled blip. Notice that the very next blip is also a crippled blip and is relatively far away here on the darkoid Yoovellus. We may conclude, therefore, that she was placed into null tau while in space, but taken out of null tau here on Yoovellus two months and three days ago. Notice that beside the last crippled blip there is a normal blip with the number three above it. This means that since coming out of null tau, she has had three anniversaries of her swallowing date. The third and last blip-date listed is two days ago. So, we may assume that she was at that location two days ago and that she is not in null tau. We don't know exactly when she arrived on Yoovellus, but we know it must have been after the date of the first crippled blip in the space lane."

He paused for a moment, studying the holo, and then began again: "We can conclude that she was on Quels for less than two months, since only one blip is there."

"That was our conclusion on Zasp," interrupted Zah Kah'than.

"Of course," acknowledged Hoolk Venqueb, continuing: "We know the exact time of the first crippled blip. We know the distance between the crippled blip

and Quels. We know roughly the speeds of various ships that take off from Quels. With the formula: rate times time equals distance, we can calculate a window of time during which the ship had to take off from Quels. Then we consult a database on Quels to find the names of those ships that took off during said window. Then we take a look at these ship's filed flight plans and see which ones took a route through this space lane.'' One of his hand's six fingers pointed to the trail between Quels and the first crippled blip.

Zah Kah'than ejaculated: ''We did that from Zasp. Only one ship took that route during said window. The ship has vanished. The ship's owner has already collected insurance on the cargo, the ship, and all hands.''

''What was the name of the ship?'' asked Hoolk Venqueb.

Vosos Vos answered: "The Quelsian Civilian Ship Zanzibar."

''Did you get visual images of the ship's crew and passengers?'' interrogated Hoolk Venqueb.

"We weren't able to get everyone, but we got most of the crew. There were no non-slave passengers that we know of. The Zanzibar was a commercial freighter. We suspect that it was a slaver, but we can't prove it. If so, we have no images of the slaves, but we know what one looks like. She's the ool with the tracking device."

''How do you know she is a slave?'' asked Hoolk Venqueb.

''We don't, it's just a guess,'' responded Zah Kah'than.

''What do you know about her?'' questioned Hoolk Venqueb.

''We know that Vosos Vos loves her but has never spoken to her. We know that, for a day, she was a dancer in a bar on Argonus, using the pseudonym Clockwise Counterclockwise. The name Uma Floralhaven is on that paper. Whether that's her true name is anyone's guess.''

"She's absolutely gorgeous, and her dances are breathtaking," added Vosos Vos for good measure.

''Her captors might have removed the tracking device from her. If so, they might have already sold her to me as a slave. I have two warehouses, containing five thousand slaves in stasis fields. I bought almost all of them during the last three months. I've already sold them, so they'll be shipped off darkoid very soon. Do you wish to view them to see if she is there?''

"We do!" voiced Vosos Vos with a firm tone.

Zah Kah'than nodded solemn agreement, and said: ''Gentlevir, may I ask how you obtain slaves?''

''I buy them from zenoc slavers,'' shrugged Hoolk Venqueb. ''That's why I'm wanted dead or alive on over a hundred worlds. But on the over two hundred worlds where slavery is legal, I'm just another esteemed professional.''

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Vosos Vos was tired. It had been an exhausting day, viewing row after row of naked slaves in stasis, human and zenoc. But much more importantly Vosos Vos was worried. He had told his Ophidian friend which bar he would be at, but Zah Kah'than had not shown up. It was midnight in Lapis Lazuli and Vosos Vos was headed back to his hotel room. Had only his friend shown up, he would gladly have barhopped till zero two hundred hours.

At breakfast, they had decided that each should view all the slaves, and to do so separately. The slaves were in two warehouses. So, Vosos Vos had spent the morning viewing naked slaves in stasis in one warehouse, while his friend was in the other. At noon, they switched warehouses. They had agreed not to wait for each other, rather to meet up at a certain bar in Lapis Lazuli. Vosos Vos opened the door to his hotel room. His eyes first fell upon his bed which had been freshly made by the android maid while he was away.

Then his gaze went to Zah Kah'than's bed. His friend was in the middle of a made bed. His tail and lower body were curled tightly. His upper body was erect in a vertical column six feet tall. His head was near the ceiling. The column was swaying from side to side as if to a snake charmer's flute. Yet, there was neither flute nor music. Vosos Vos had never seen his friend so transfixed before, so oblivious to his surroundings. Tears were flowing from the Ophidian's eyes, causing scales on his upper body to glisten in the amber light. Vosos Vos brought his Ophidian interpreter on line, closed the door behind him, and datavised with great concern: "What is wrong, my friend?"

Getting no response, Vosos Vos took off his boots, and sat on his own bed, observing his friend. After a few minutes, his friend's holo interpreter materialized and said: ''It is her, Vosos Vos. It is the female Ophidian I spoke to you about when we were in space, gazing out the viewport, watching the stars rush by. It is my beloved. I have found her. She was one of the two hundred Ophidian slaves in this afternoon's warehouse.''

Stunned, Vosos Vos gasped: "Are you absolutely certain?"

''I am. It is indeed she. There is not the shadow of a doubt. The tattoo that I placed on her tail is still there. Since she has not shed her skin, it can only mean that she has been in stasis for the last twenty-five years.''

For a few minutes Vosos Vos sat silent, and then questioned: "Did you view all of the slaves in the warehouse?"

''I did.''

"Did you see anyone else whom you recognized?"

''I did not.''

"Well, this afternoon, I saw one slave that I knew; a human man. He is a friend of mine."

Zah Kah'than blinked twice.

Vosos Vos lay down in bed. He closed his eyes. He thought about his human friend, now a slave in stasis. He thought about his human friend's fiancé; in his mind's eye he remembered every moment of the last day that he saw her:

"Come in," she answered in a commanding yet distinctly feminine voice. Vosos Vos entered and stood very respectfully at attention, before her desk. He was very uncomfortable. He breathed deeply, trying to calm his racing pulse. Thank the Void! He only had to face this intimidating darkool once a month. She was more than just a DM (Darkoid Miner); she was a DMO (Darkoid Mine Owner). He deeply regretted the day he signed the contract that had made her his boss. The harder he tried to please her, the harsher was her criticism. She was a fierce perfectionist and, so far, always right. Deep in his soul was hidden his secret desire to prove her wrong just once.

"Have my EMCON (EMission CONtrol) orders been scrupulously obeyed this last month?" she asked in an urgent tone.

He groaned inwardly and answered, "Ma'am, you've asked me this question every month for the last year. The answer is still: yes. As far as I know, neither I nor the robots, nor anything else, have radiated any active emission during the last month." He could feel his eyes glazing over. "Yet, you've never told me why this absurdly strict EMCON policy is so important."

Taken aback, she responded, "That's the first disrespectful tone I've ever heard in your voice."

"My apologies, Ma'am, I haven't had any sleep in forty-eight hours. I'm beat," he sagged, closing his eyes.

"May I tell you something in the strictest confidence?" she enquired in a pleading tone.

"Okay, Ma'am," he uttered, opening his eyes.

"A year ago, in fact, two days after you arrived here, my passive autosensors picked up an unknown vessel in a shipping lane which runs a few light seconds from here." She pressed a button. A hologram materialized in the air beside her desk. "Here's the optical image of it," she pointed. The vessel's holo was as large as the desk itself. "Have you ever seen this vessel or any like it?"

"No, ma'am, not to my knowledge. The design of the craft is completely unfamiliar. However, I'm not a walking encyclopedia of ships. Is it zenoc?"

"I don't know. I'd dearly like to know." She pointed to a large globular object that floated in the air in a corner of the room. "Do you see that device?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Do you know what it is?"

"No Ma'am."

"Take a wild guess."

"A gigantic crystal ball for giant psychics with in-built antigravity," responded Vosos Vos. Her burst of laughter was the first time he had ever heard her laugh. He felt the tension in the room vanish like melting ice.

"Walk up to it," she ordered. "Do you see the two-foot long needle that floats inside?"

"Yes. I see it."

"That needle points toward and measures rich concentrations of tachyons. It is a Forerunner relic, originally found on the darkoid, Yoovellus. Have you ever been to Yoovellus?"

"No, but I've heard of it in Forerunner museums. I'm aware that it is one of the few known Forerunner darkoids."

"The device was bequeathed to me by my late father who spent much of his life studying it. Two days after you arrived, I heard it beep an alarm, while I was sitting here at my desk. I dug out my father's reports on how to operate it. It has four modes: a DF mode, a distance measurement mode, an intensity measurement mode, and a mode that measures quality. Using all four modes, I've learned that something has created a huge tachyonic field across the interstellar shipping lane that runs near here." She pointed to the hole. "That mysterious starship sits inside and right on the edge of this field. That's why I ordered EMCON. And here's the real stickler; any vessel entering the field disappears."

"What do you mean it disappears?" he gasped.

"It vanishes from all my passive sensors. One second it's there; the next second it's gone."

She held up a tick. "I've made a full report on the mysterious starship, the tachyonic field, and the vanishing ships. Since you arrived here, there has been no traffic in the shipping lane until last week. A darkoid mining vessel entered the field and vanished. Two days later a second darkoid mining vessel entered and also vanished. I recognized its EM signature. My fiancé was aboard. Do you recall the darkool who suggested to me that I hire you?"

"Yes Ma'am, he was a friend of mine."

"And how many times did you meet with this friend?"

"Only twice, I guess. Once at a bar on Fligsid, and two days later at the miner's convention where he introduced me to you, recommending me for a job as apprentice miner."

"He was my fiancé. Did you really not know?"

"I had no idea," said Vosos Vos, surprised. "He never even let on that he had a fiancée. I thought you were just a fellow miner to him."

"We didn't want our private relationship to be publicly known until after the

wedding. To observe EMCON, I stopped answering his subspace messages two days after you arrived. It took him a year to come and see what was wrong,'' she related in a miffed tone. ''The first vessel wasn't quite close enough for an optical sighting, and when it stopped radiating its radar, SUBCOM (SUBspace COMmunicator), and TACAN (TACtical Aid to Navigation); I thought that they had gone into an EMCON drill, especially since my passive sensors detected no explosion. I should have sent my fiancé a warning,'' she confessed with deep grief in her voice.

''I would have made the same error,'' consoled Vosos Vos.

After a few tears and a few moments of pause, she changed the subject. ''I got your written notice,'' she said, referring to his legally required official memorandum to her, informing her that he would not be requesting contract renewal. ''Is there anything I can do that would change your mind?''

He gulped but answered. ''No Ma'am.'' He was determined to seek employment elsewhere.

''Where will you go? What will you do? Before you signed on with me, you had never worked as a miner. Now that you know the ropes, will you pursue it?''

''I have no idea, Ma'am, I'll take a hefty vacation and decide then.''

''I've paid into your account an advance payment. Part of it is the remainder of your salary between now and contract expiration. The rest is a bonus. I'm ordering you on your last mission. You are to leave, now. That means immediately, today, without delay. Proceed at maximum speed. Take a beetle through the tunnels, not on the surface. Go to Escape Pod Zebra. At that point, this darkoid will be between you and the unknown vessel. Get in the pod. Blast off at maximum acceleration. Keep this darkoid between you and the unknown vessel. You'll reach weightlessness at one hundred miles. At that point shut off the drive and coast for one light second. Then cut the drive on and head for the darkoid Fligsid. Other than the drive, maintain strict EMCON from blast off to Fligsid orbit. We must assume the unknown vessel has ESM. By radiating something, you might kill us all.''

She handed him the tick. ''Take this tick to Fligsid. Make copies of it. Take one copy to the office of the Darkoid Miner's Union. Take one copy to the Naval Liaison Officer at the embassy of the planet Quels. Read the tick on the voyage. You may say anything that's in the tick.'' She pointed to the floating tachyon meter in the corner. ''Do not mention that device in any way, shape, or form. I don't want raiders here, killing me for a Forerunner relic.''

''Very well, Ma'am. I'll do my best. If that's all, I'll take my leave of you now and be on my way.''

''Godspeed, Darkool.''

''Godspeed, Finema Dova,'' replied Vosos Vos as he exited through the hatch.

In a Lapis Lazuli hotel room, an odd event was transpiring. Vosos Vos was

snoring in his bed. In the other bed, a wide-awake Zah Kah'than was swaying from side to side to the sound of the snoring. On the nightstand between the beds, lay a copy of the subspace message that Vosos Vos had sent earlier that evening. It read:

FROM: VOSOS VOS.

HOTEL DIAMANT. LAPIS LAZULI.

DARKOID YOOVELLUS.

TO: DMO FINEMA DOVA.

DARKOID XORBEENUS.

FOUND YOUR FIANCÉ TODAY. A SLAVE IN STASIS, SOLD TO OFFDARKOID BUYER. COME ASAP. SHORT OF FUNDS.

GODSPEED.

VOSOS VOS.

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"I don't know," answered Hoolk Venqueb. "You must understand that often to zenocs, slaves in stasis are like funds in a savings account; you can always spend them. I've sold many slaves who had been in stasis twenty-five years or longer. I'll sell you the two slaves, but only at double the price. I'll put alternates in their places. My contracts always allow for a few alternates. May I please see that subspace message you mentioned?"

Vosos handed it to him. Hoolk Venqueb nodded to the two cyborgs standing behind Vosos Vos and Zah Kah'than. In the blink of an eye, both cyborgs drew stun pistols and fired. Vosos Vos and Zah Kah'than fell to the floor, unconscious.

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The Darkool, Finema Dova walked down the gangplank and set foot on the darkoid, Yoovellus. Since she was a very small girl, she had dreamed of coming here, ever since her father had shown her his hovering Forerunner tachyon meter. Coming here felt like a pilgrimage to her. She felt that being here was paying a great honor to her dear father and his lifelong study of the Forerunner relic. Yet, she reminded herself that she had very serious business to attend to here. Thanks to Vosos Vos and his cryptic, subspace message, perhaps she might have a chance to have her fiancé back. She felt deeply ashamed that she had already given him up for good. The fact that she was not still in mourning when the message arrived made her heart feel miserable. Yet, at the same time she felt great joy to know that her beloved was still alive. Neither she nor her father had ever owned a slave, yet she knew what was common knowledge about the slave trade. She knew that most slaves have their memories drained so that they remember nothing of their previous lives. She was aware that false memories were implanted that gave the slave a new personal history. The thought that her fiancé might not even know her was

a never-ending feeling of depression for her. She hoped and prayed that she could rescue him before the memory drainage and implantation. Had she come in time? Vosos Vos' message had left so many important questions unanswered.

She hailed a hovertaxi and climbed in. "Please take me to Hotel Diamant," she requested of the driver. He nodded affirmatively and raced off into the streets of Lapis Lazuli.

"Someone I know," began the driver, "asked me to be on the lookout for the Darkool, Finema Dova. Might that be you, Madam?"

"Well, who is the ool whom you know," she countered cautiously.

"His name is Vosos Vos, Gentlefem."

"Then, yes, I am Finema Dova," she stated with finality.

The driver pressed a button and the Darkool, Finema Dova, slumped into a coma, a victim of a stun pistol blast, fired from within her seat. On Lapis Lazuli, every hovertaxi was so equipped. It had virtually eliminated the hovertaxi robbery rate. A very small pellet penetrated the flesh of the buttocks, delivering two things: a powerful neurolytic sedative; and one hundred thousands volts, but almost zero amps, of electricity, cycling at the exact message frequency of human neurons.

The driver changed course, heading for the offices of his employer, the Darkool, Hoolk Venqueb. The driver datavised an order to his Implunt. The Implunt instantly complied, making a hologram appear in the driver's left eye, and only in the left eye. With his right eye, he continued to view the road. With his left eye, he viewed alternating holographic images with excellent resolution. Two were overhead views of the fare, two were views of the fare from the back of both front seats, two were views of the fare from either side of the vehicle, two were views from both back floorboards.

The driver pressed a button. The door to the catchall flopped open. In a lighting-swift movement, out crawled a robotic crab the size of a football. "Yes, Carnool Driver," uttered the crab in a voice that was badly in need of a tune up.

"Look, goof ool, you know the routine. Get in the back seat. Check the fare's wound. Scan for germs. Administer appropriate medicine. Make sure the pellet didn't hit the sciatic nerve or any other vital part. Use the dermal regenerator. Do not leave a scar. Monitor her vital signs. Don't let her die on me. Don't let any permanent harm come to her. Check to make sure the sedative is taking effect normally. Check her nerves for bad harmonics. Take off her clothes. Search all pockets, removing any contents. Place any contents into a container. Bring the container to me. Fold her clothes. Scan clothes and body for weapons. Look for weapons both outside and inside the body. When you finish your standard routine, I have some other things for you to do. Do you have a pulmonary unit?"

"Of course, Carnool Driver, I'm a Mark Seventeen, the latest edition. I just hit

the streets last week and... .''

''Shut up, goof ool!'' guffawed the driver, ''I've had you for three months! Your chronometer's busted!'' The driver sighed and continued: ''She has on an oh-two helmet. Remove it. Put it in the trunk.''

''Unable to obey, Carnool Driver.''

''Why not, goof ool,'' he complained, exasperated.

''My test of the air reveals no oxygen.''

A wave of shame and remorse flooded the senses of the driver. ''Mercy,'' he lamented. ''I nearly killed a fare. My left eye distracted me. I promise not to call you bad names ever again.'' He pressed a button. He could hear the swish of oxygen rushing into the cab. ''How about now, Gentlebot?''

''The air will now sustain a Carnool,'' replied the robot in a voice filled with static.

''Take off her oh-two helmet,'' repeated the driver. ''Put it in the trunk. Install a unit in her lungs. Check to see that it works. Tell me when I can shut off my cab's oh-two generator. Scan her entire body for nanobot heaters. If you find them, see if every cell has one. If so, make certain they all work. Comply!''

It was a very fast robot, and moved in a blur of motion. Sixty Zaspian seconds later, the crab reported back to the driver in its faulty, mechanical monotone: ''Task completed, Carnool Driver. You may turn off your cab's oxygen generator. Her nanobot heaters are fine.'' The crab handed over a container of Finema Dova's personal effects.

''Thank you, Gentlebot. You may return to your cave now.'' In a blur, the robot was into the catchall, slamming the door behind it.

The driver was red in the face from looking at the holo views in his left eye. She was truly a stunning beauty. She looked even better with her clothes off. His heart pounded. His driving was becoming erratic. Yet, he felt sorry that she was to become a slave. What crime had she committed? There was no capital punishment on Yoovellus. Felons were punished with slavery. As he looked at the various views of her lovely figure, he vowed to do his best to purchase her. A few minutes later, he made that request to the spaceport's mayor, constable, judge, and jury, the Darkool, Hoolk Venqueb, who promptly denied it. The driver's unhappiness was quite mollified, however, by the bounty instantly paid him. Catching slaves-to-be was very profitable.

CHAPTER 5

Wanderlust and a touch of poetry led Zan Fadron into the service of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. of the darkoid Yoovellus, the darkoid Fligsid, the planet Zasp, the planet Quels, and many other darkoids, planets, space stations, moons,

and other places. An unsuspected business ability kept him there and smothered whatever adventurer lay in the lad. By the time Zan Fadron saw the only possibility of romance in the firm's offices lay among the sexy ditzoids, the size of his paycheck had tethered him to his post. A ditzoid would have been fine, if it were not for his fetish for living flesh. These androids had refined instincts and emotions. Yes, the ditzoids were charming in the extreme, but Zan Fadron's subconscious knowledge kept them out of his arms. In point of fact, he never did marry a ditzoid, slough his poetry, and make another swallow's nest in the canyons of Lapis Lazuli. A certain Jack-a-Dreams mood, a shimmer of fancy, always floated between him and the comfortable commonplace of marriage. Not to mention, the deeply troubling nature of his recurring dream that the girl he loved was in a distant canyon in the outbacks. It seemed odd to him, that he always thought of that dream so very intensively when he would encounter those ools in the spaceport who kept insisting to him that he was not Zan Fadron, but rather that he was some strange ool by the name of Vosos Vos. Why were those ools such a disturbing nuisance to him? He would have to try much harder to be nice to them, and more courteously laugh them aside.

The artificial bimboes in the office resented Zan Fadron's bachelorhood. The ditzoid's female sex instinctively looks upon a man as a possible easement of life's roughnesses. The unattached male is at once a criticism upon their collective charms and a slacker. He had to be very careful never to use the term "ditzoid" out loud. It was taboo. The moniker's implied connotation that they were stupid was, of course, erroneous. They were in fact quite smart. These ditzoid secretaries also resented Zan Fadron's high salary which provided him with many more pulsars to spend in the shops and bars of Lapis Lazuli than did the salaries of the secretaries. Once a secretary snapped out in Zan Fadron's presence something about "the big stiff spells 'soul' with a pulsar mark." She was alluding to her belief that it was only her lower salary that kept him from flirting with her. She would have been surprised, and no doubt further irritated, had she known that when the secretaries of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. filed out into Maiden Lane at four o'clock, Zan Fadron always leaned out of the window and watched their tiny figures lose themselves in the pedestrian traffic. There was something vaguely alluring about them, thus vanishing, as seen from a top view, ten stories removed.

During this period of his life Zan Fadron learned a lot through the use of Instantcourses. Each Instantcourse was a small cylinder to be inserted into a small hole in the base of his skull. A one semester's class could be taken in just a few seconds. Thus he studied darkoid mining, Yoovellian geography, commercial law, and the custom differentiations of the various darkoids, planets, etc., because he saw, as everyone saw, that the future of Yoovellian trade centered largely in its own region of space. In the course of time he became one of the to-other-worlds correspondents in the office. In this position the subspace messages he received

from offdarkoid ools, their leisurely rhetoric and ornate courtesy painted sun-shot and dark-shadowed Utopias before his wistful fancy. Sometimes a sort of despair filled the executive that mere communications could travel to and from such favored worlds while he remained rooted at his desk. Of course it all would instantly collapse were it not for the firm's overland caravan lines which meandered through the remote areas of Yoovellus and traded with the powerful zenoc overlords and their mostly human Outool vassals. So, of course, he studied the languages and cultures of both zenocs and Outools. Darkools who lived in the outbacks were sometimes called "Outools," especially by the Darkool metropolitans.

Zan Fadron had been in the service of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. for four and a half Zaspian years when Kal Pavan, the office's charismatic motivator and senior executive, committed a crime, and was sold as a slave. He was succeeded by the present incumbent, Pul Uxtar. This is no place to go into Pul Uxtar's extraordinary shipping career. All starship-freighter wiselings, all students of the development of Yoovellus' interstellar trade, are familiar with the great impetus the Pul Uxtar plan gave the freighter service of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. and, by reaction, to many other offdarkoid freighter lines.

Not to dally over threadbare material; when Pul Uxtar took control of the space fleet of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., those freighters were sailing back from offdarkoid locales in ballast or, at best, half laden. Pul Uxtar developed the idea of owning offdarkoid industries to freight his own bottoms. Today the tricolor of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. floats over uranium mines on the darkoid Blegodune, artificial coffee factories on the darkoid Fligsid, ivory nut plantations on the planet Zasp, cacao forests on the planet Quels, and robot assembly plants on the darkoid Horgadil.

In this burst of development, there arose in the firm's offices a strong demand for ools of interstellar vision to be used in the overland caravan routes, essential to trade with the outback regions of Yoovellus. Notwithstanding the fact that Zan Fadron lacked what may be called the belligerency of the usual successful Yoovellian business Darkool, nevertheless he was tried out, first as traveling auditor, then as a mining consultant, and later as a traveling business representative of the firm's caravan lines in the outbacks of Yoovellus.

It really turned out to be a fortunate choice. About Zan Fadron hung a shadow of wistfulness that softened everything he said or did. It ameliorated his Lapis Lazuli metropolitanism into something closely akin to the courtesy of the Outools themselves. Chance had tossed Zan Fadron into his milieu. For example, one of the Setmena Clan of the outback tribal nation Ogaheet, in closing a deal to ship lapis Lazuli gemstones on the caravans of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., remarked with a smile to Zan Fadron: "Gentlevir Zan Fadron, an acquaintance of mine once swore to me there were no gentlehomoes to be found in Lapis Lazuli. I

am sorry he did not find you at home.''

And the caravan's agent had the aplomb to parry the thrust at the metropolitanism of his fellow metropolitans by saying: ''My absence from home was unavoidable; at the time I was away studying how to metamorphize into a Gentlehomo, while at the same time avoiding outoolianism when setting foot among the renown Gentlehomoes of the Setmena Clan of the Ogaheet.'' The riposte through the cloak of a compliment entirely delighted the Setmena Clan member.

Zan Fadron never forgot the riding out from the edge of Lapis Lazuli onto the route of his first caravan into the outbacks of Yoovellus. The tang of adventure that had landed him in the offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., four and a half years previously, reasserted itself in his blood. It seemed that the joy of life was finally coming to him in his twenty-fifth year.

He stood on the weather side of his xirquanodon, grasping the rope ladder tightly, facing a half gale that beat in from the west. His xirquanodon was a small, young one. It could only carry a hundred slaves, a master, supplies, and one standard container of gemstones. It seemed to him that the fierceness of the wind blew out of his life the musty years of his office work, his cocoon period. He was about to climb up the rope ladder to get aboard this gigantic, thousand-legged, imported beast, and ride into a new and winey dawn. What he expected that dawn to bring him he could never have formulated. There was a woman in it certainly. A blond or a demi-blond, since he was a brunette and as yet, had not known but brunes. A woman fairer than himself he had never touched if the truth be told.

She would certainly have her own whims, of course, as every ool does. Who knows, she might even like clocks, for example. In the vision of every bachelor gleams the rondures of a woman real or feigned; just as in the memory of a benedict glows the dalliance of unmarried days. These are the morning and evening stars of man's life.

To any one at all familiar with Yoovellian outback traditions, Zan Fadron's naïveté must appear amusing. Zan Fadron would have no opportunity of knowing the exclusive upper-class Outool families. Zan Fadron not only did not belong, his work made it impossible. To the Outool aristocracy commercialism is tainted. The Outool clings to the medieval idea that wealth should be wrung from the sweat of the unwilling, not from the purse of the unwary; he prefers peonage to commerce. It is more glorious and less fatiguing. Zan Fadron was damned before trial and never had his day in court. Moreover the sort of romance with which Zan Fadron titillated his fancy does not obtain in the outback. The Lapis Lazuli metropolitan's idea of romance is marriage and mistresses. It is somewhat akin to the Zaspian shopkeeper's idea of business, where he has three or four prices on every article in his inventory. The Lapis Lazuli metropolitan's slogan seems to be, Caveat emp-

tor et mulier. The whole ensemble lacks a certain high cold wind that blows through the Zasp-Quelsian idea of romance.

In time Zan Fadron learned these things, and the bars of his prison enfolded him again. The outback of Yoovellus became an extension of the offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. on Maiden Lane. It became hard for him to feel that the Outool women were other than ditzoids twice removed. He had to often remind himself that these were real flesh-and-blood wonderfully human women in the outback and not remotely like the artificial female androids in the firm's offices. For example, the outool women didn't prance; they walked. For example, they didn't have the permanent, twenty-four-hour-a-day, laserlike, sparkling, hot-totrot, norepinephrine glow of sexual excitation in their eyes; often the eyes of Outool ladles were in fact flat dull; sometimes even terribly depressingly dull, duller than a darkoid night. He did have to confess, though, that there were, among the Outool girls, some truly delightful sparklers.

Pul Uxtar's greatest plan as head of the home office's millions was his desire to establish a Zeppelin passenger service from Lapis Lazuli to Otiqua Canyon, a previously isolated outback region; and to construct along the Mosaza Fault Line and across the Sedna Mountains, a line of hangers, supply depots, and big tourist hotels at favorable locations. At present, it holds the record as being the darkoid's most ambitious aerial plan. Every inch of the route had to be negotiated with the Zenoc warlords that control the region. Any flying vessel, other than a primitive Zeppelin, would be shot down as soon as it entered zenoc air space. The zenocs agreed to the lumbering Zeppelins because they didn't fear them, and they wanted to further their lucrative slave trade that went through Lapis Lazuli.

In formulating his plans, Pul Uxtar called Zan Fadron into his office for a conference. He presented the idea in a block to Zan Fadron for the caravan agent to elaborate on it. It was this: At that time the transcontinental caravan from Soneub Basin to Palvariso Plain which connected with the Untafugusta Caravan line into the canyons of Urepis, Libovia, and Roduaca, held a monopoly on travel across the Plegaston Continent. Palvariso was thirteen weeks from New Fwagen, by way of the Soneub Basin. Pul Uxtar's projected line from Otiqua Canyon to Lapis Lazuli would cut the schedule to sixteen days with the advantage of flying over some of the richest scenery on the darkoid. Beneath the traveler would unroll the mysteries of the Mosaza Fault Line, the grandeur of the Sedna Mountain Range, and the beauties of the Yoovellian outback, all wonderfully visible through night vision scopes. As a tourist attraction, such an aerial tour would be unequaled on the globe. Moreover, the price that could be quoted would be almost as low as the longer and more grueling journey by caravan across the monotonous plain of the Envegrat.

Pul Uxtar estimated the cost of such a project at from fifteen to eighteen mil-

lion pulsars. He quickly reestimated it to be nineteen and three quarters. When he laid this outline before his subordinate, he impressed upon Zan Fadron the need of absolute secrecy in the preliminary survey. The Elika-Envegrat Caravan Line was operated by a hostile competitor. They would not be indifferent to such rivalry. No doubt they would try to install a duplicate service. Moreover they already had caravan stops in the projected route. With these caravan stops as a base of construction, they could launch their dirigibles before the airships of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. could get into the air. In fact the zenoc warlords said that they would accept only the first of either of the companies to establish a Zeppelin service.

"Therefore," pointed out the Senior Executive, "I would suggest that your preliminary survey be conducted as inconspicuously as possible. Why not be engaged ostensibly upon some other venture, say prospecting for uranium, or seeking a soil that will produce exotic plants in greenhouses. These plants can then be turned into exotic foods and exotic drinks. Use your judgment about the color of your expedition, select your own personnel, choose your own route, and do it all unobserved."

Zan Fadron remained in his Lapis Lazuli office upward of three weeks after this consultation, preparing for his journey of exploration. During this period there stuck in his head the problem of an entirely inconspicuous survey.

Here was the difficulty. Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. was very well known in the outback for the many ventures it had promoted. Zan Fadron was a known agent of this company. Outoollian financiers had come to watch him as a commercial weathercock pointing the winds of fortune. The outbacker is not an ool of action in the Lapis Lazuli metropolitan sense. He is deliberate but highly observing; he is indolent but full of chicanery. He is an extremely difficult darkool to beguile. Zan Fadron knew if he launched any sort of expedition into the outback from any point on the edge of Lapis Lazuli, there was a danger that half a dozen ools in his employ would be agents of the Elika-Envegrat Caravan Line.

That formed his problem. The caravan agent required no ordinary deception. He needed something enigmatic, impenetrable, absolute. There he stuck. Life has a surprising way of presenting to the seeker exactly what he is looking for. It seems almost as if mind fashioned matter in its own image as the modern Zaspian sage Sed Op claims it does. To wish is to possess. This, of course, is no new truth. It was promulgated fifty thousand years ago by a certain wise man. This seer expressed it, "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

The manner in which Zan Fadron came to know Thovas Tho is a case in point. In Lapis Lazuli, the gemstone mining, slave trade, and caravan agent had few acquaintances, because he was only in the city for his agency and had little time for anything else. In Lapis Lazuli acquaintanceship seldom persists for more than from

ten Zaspian minutes to fourteen or fifteen Zaspian days. So Zan Fadron always found himself alone in Yoovellus' capital, the city that had adopted him from a distant darkoid.

To amuse himself he usually strolled a little after dinner up and down Via Kvankam or Via Apenau, watching the dinner parties, the theatergoers, crowds, the hovercraft, and the cushion-hoofed xirquanodons. Imported from a different galaxy, xirquanodons never ceased to awe him. Even the smallest among them was twice as tall as any ancient train, and longer that any ancient rail car. These thousand-legged beasts could cruise at one hundred miles an hour without even straining. Yet, he felt sorry for them for they were electronically enslaved. They were not sapient, but they were sentient. They were as comfortable in the streets of the metropolis as they were in the outback. An average caravan consisted of around twenty of them. An adult xirquanodon could carry a thousand slaves or equal weight in anything else.

They were the primary beast of burden on the darkoid. Even though enslaved, there was still love and affection between them and their masters. They looked like a cross between a hovertruck, a giant turtle, and a millipede. Their tough multijointed carapace was like war armor. From a side view, most of the height of their legs was not covered by the carapace, unless they were sleeping, hiding, or resting. High-tech intracellular units took care of heating, oxygen, water, and nutrition; no need to feed and water them.

To the theaters themselves he did not go because, like most darkool men with a touch of romance in their makeup, the drama is too foreordained, its movement too metronomic, its action too logical, and its lunging, metamorphosing holograms too overwhelming. When logic and special effects comes in at the stage door, romance takes to its wings.

After the hour of dinner and theater movement, Zan Fadron liked to sit in Tamen Kun Park. This is a pleasant bit of grass and trees with hovering benches. There were those Hopeless trees that had in every cell a zenoc unit that heated and assembled molecules of carbon dioxide, hydrogen oxide (water), and nutritional chemicals from a quantum matrix. Their roots burrowed into the ground, not for water and food, but only for anchorage. Not every tree used the same technology. For example there were the trees with lumoplasts in their cells. In some trees, a chloroplast enveloped the lumoplast. In others, the lumoplast enveloped the chloroplast. The lumoplast radiated the light. The chloroplast contained the chlorophyll. Thus real photosynthesis was had in spite of the artificially created carbon dioxide, water, etc. Plants large and small, containing these technologies now covered most of the surface area of the darkoid Yoovellus. Hundreds of planets and darkoids had laws banning the importation of Yoovellian plants. The sapients on those worlds were terribly frightened of this zenoc Pandora's box. To

Yoovellians, for the most part, it was viewed as a wonderful godsend, since no one had suffered a bad effect from it. Such vegetation was sometimes termed "Hopeless" because these plants flourished in places where legions of scientists once said were places where growing plants was "Hopeless." The lumoplastic Hopeless trees generated just barely enough light beneath them to read; for those who enjoyed reading in the shade. In a million years or less, the atmosphere of Yoovellus might be breathable without pulmonary oxygen generators, since the plants were giving off oxygen as a waste product. On the Hopeless grass, and around and under the Hopeless trees, meandered office ools, news media hacks, lawyers, yeggs, laundrymen, curio dealers, and vaudevillians. They were a mixture of zenocs, humans, cyborgs, androids, and robots. They all liked to come out and sit for a while to breathe the oxygenless air and do some sapient-watching.

The presence of the library gives the park a certain informed atmosphere. Loiterers here are knowing Gentlesaps (pronounced with a long "a"!!) who discuss the topics of the darkoidisms various, treaties secret, news suppressed, the art of preserving mummies on diverse worlds, the vice problem, the best yeggmen, outbackery jokes, and which starship has most recently disappeared. High against the skyscrapers flash and fade acres of brightly lit holographic signs advising the midget philosophers below to "Smoke Mudelian;" "Eat Zaspian Wheat Waffles;" "Horgadilian Chop Suey;" "Tell Her With Flowers;" "Zur An's Detectives Never Sleep."

Fares hail and exit hovertaxis; yeggs circulate, looking left and right; the ground vibrates as a huge fully loaded xirquanodon lumbers by; private hovercars honk; skyscrapers pulsate heat; the snore of a landing starship lessens to a burled thunder; the crowds flow past in well-defined drifts.

Tamen Kun Park always appealed to Zan Fadron as the first movement of some great, confused drama that would never know a curtain. Thank the void! He had not today run into either one of those two ools that kept insanely insisting that his name was really not Zan Fadron but Vosos Vos. On the evening before he was to board the caravan, Zan Fadron went down to Tamen Kun Park and found a hoverbench seat in this pleasant air hole on the crust of Yoovellus. The benchmate chance dealt to the promoter was a short sturdy man in a style of dress suit often worn by darkoid miners. The suit was black and needed pressing. He wore a felt hat with a brim a trifle wide for the average miner's dress hat.

He was sunburned, perhaps from a miner's sun lamp. Presently he took off the hat, on account of the wind. Zan Fadron noticed he had a suit of jet-black hair, oiled down to a piano finish over the left side of his head, while on the right side; his hair was piled up in large, exact, scroll-like curls. It was the coiffure typical from a group of rustic miners on the darkoid, Fligsid. The ool himself had the look of a youth who had ridden his years into hard places.

As Zan Fadron absorbed these details, his bench-mate turned to him with perfect spontaneity and asked the name of a nearby skyscraper. His voice had the slurring, nasal twang of an uneducated miner from Fligsid. The caravan agent gave the information with a faint sense of amusement. Shivering, the man drew a deep breath, made a move with his hat as if to replace it on his head, but seemed to apprehend some social mistake and restored it to his glossy head.

"Yoovellus may be far away from my home," he volunteered, "but it appears about as cold as Fligsid to me."

"Come from Fligsid?"

"Thovas Tho, from a mine of the same name."

He used the phrase with a patness that suggested many repetitions. At the same time he turned and held out a hand to Zan Fadron. This seemed to be in the nature of an introduction. The caravan promoter shook hands, gave his own name, then asked a little uncertainly, "Do you mean you live in a mine named Thovas Tho?"

"That's right; Thovas Tho Mine, Darkoid Fligsid, named after my father. I come from a long proud line of Thovas Thos. My father moved us out into the Dark Matter from the planet Quels when I was just barely a shaver. He staked off a claim to a hundred and sixty acres of basin-land and jest naturally squatted on six hundred more. When they come to put him off, glory to Papa, they'd waited too long and it belonged to the old man."

Thovas Tho dropped his phrase of laudation with perfect simplicity and with no trace of irreverence. The caravan agent looked up at the sign which assured him Zur An's detectives never slept; then after a moment, observed in a casual voice that Fligsid lands had advanced sharply in value. Thovas Tho nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, the Forerunner Gods have sure blessed our family, and I thought I would pay back Their many mercies by spreadin' the Word."

Out of this sentence, the phrases "many mercies" and "spreadin' the Word" each wore the cadence of much use.

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. promoter looked at his ool carefully. "By... by what?"

"Spreadin' the Word," repeated the Fligsidian, not realizing the words could involve any obscurity.

"You came to Lapis Lazuli to... to... spreadin' the Word?" groped Zan Fadron.

"Oh, no, not in Lapis Lazuli. I guess there's plenty of Catechisms in Lapis Lazuli. I'm going into the outback. That's my chosen field." His faint accent on the words "chosen field" told Zan Fadron this, too, was a favored cliché.

The caravan agent nodded, still slightly at sea. "I see, you are going into the

outback to sell religious publications... .''

''Give them away,'' corrected Thovas Tho.

''To give them away?''

Thovas Tho nodded. ''To make my calling and election sure, brothool.''

Zan Fadron took a moment in an effort to construe this oleo of politics and theology, but after a moment resigned.

''When do you depart on caravan?''

''That's just up to the Forerunner Lords,'' drawled Thovas Tho. ''I'm working for Them now.'' He spoke as concretely as if he knew the Deities' street address and subspace number. ''I come up here to depart on the caravan Solar Queen tomorrow. I thought I come up in plenty o' time, but they tell me down at the office all the gondolas are sold on the Solar Queen. Not only that, but all the gondolas are sold on the next caravan three Zaspian months from now. I went down to the Solar Queen herself to ask and make sure, but down there they said the office ools knew more about it than they did.

''Well, after I done all I could, I jest went back to my room and put my case before the Forerunner Lords. I been wrastlin' with Them all day in prayer; tellin' Them, if it's Their Will, to lead me to a gondola on the Solar Queen somehow. Well, I wrastled all day. About a hour ago, I felt like I got a answer, so I jest let Them direct me, and took a little walk and come out here and sat down.''

Zan Fadron stared at the fellow. ''You don't really mean you are sitting here waiting for... for the Omnipotent Beings to send you a berth on the Solar Queen?''

Thovas Tho straightened with a faint belligerency. ''Why ool, you don't doubt They could, do you?''

Zan Fadron abandoned the point hastily. ''How are you going to get along in the outback; do you speak any of the Outoollian languages?''

''Why, yes,'' admitted the Fligsidian simply. ''The Forerunner Gods sent me to have a data port installed.'' He pointed at the small hole in the base of his skull, ''and They caused me to use Instantcourses and I'm fluent now in several Outoolian languages. They've caused me to speak in tongues. They're running this shebang, not me.''

The conversation was again slipping out of the caravan promoter's grasp. He cast about for another topic and observed that he himself was departing on the Solar Queen the next day.

Thovas Tho sprang up, a sudden light pouring into his sunburned face. ''You are! Well, bless Their holy name! I knowed They wouldn't desert me here in Lapis Lazuli! Praise the Forerunner Lords!''

Zan Fadron held up a protesting hand: ''Hold on! Wait, Gentlevir Thovas Tho. I don't want you to build any false hopes. I can't take you... .''

"Why, I'll bet you do!" cried Thovas Tho, "What have we been led together here for? Fount of Mercy!"

"I am not aware of being led, although..." Zan Fadron hesitated as the amazingness of the coincidence thrust itself upon him, "...although it is extraordinary that you should have stumbled upon anybody at all billeted for your caravan. Come to think about it, it's really astounding. Lapis Lazuli is a city completely full of people; only three hundred passengers on the Solar Queen, numerous places in the city where two ools can meet; perhaps fifty of the caravan's passengers are here in the park tonight."

"Brothool Zan Fadron, what are you doing?" enquired the Fligsidian ingenuously.

"I was trying to calculate how many chances out of a million you had of meeting a passenger on the Solar Queen when you walked out, took this seat and waited for one to come along."

"My brothool," said Thovas Tho with a warming smile, "don't worry your head about the mysteries of the Forerunner Gods. I used to try to reason things out tull I jest th'owed myself on Their holy promises. Ain't you got an extry bed in your gondola on the Solar Queen?

"No."

"Ain't you got no space on the floor where your trunks ain't settin' where I could lay down at nights?"

"Well, yes," admitted Zan Fadron, "I have reserved a whole suite of gondola cars but ... ."

"Praise the Forerunner Gods!" ejaculated Thovas Tho in an emotional tone.

"But hold on," protested Zan Fadron with an uncomfortable feeling that his moral supports were slipping.

"Sure, I'm holding on," a certain twinkle in his black eyes signaled a sense of humor; "I ain't goin' to let go. The Forerunner Lord's done Their work, and I'll do mine. Now look here, Brothool Zan Fadron, you won't even see me in your sweet gondola cars. I'll slip in about ten or half past at night, long after you've gone to bed; and I'll yave out by three or four in the morning long before you get up."

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent felt himself thawing, a little unwillingly. Then too, Thovas Tho's faith appealed to him as a sporting proposition. The ool had taken a chance of about one in ten thousand — he had managed the figures roughly — and was about to win. It gave Zan Fadron a sort of thrill. It was a bit of genuine romance, a touch of the wildly improbable, a gesture of the lawless gods who make laws, but who disport themselves above laws.

"What are you going to do when you get down there, Brothool Zan Fadron?" Thovas Tho's accent included himself in the voyage.

The promoter was amused.

"Why I'm going to... ."

Here he stopped. For some reason he did not want to tell Thovas Tho a lie.

"I hope it ain't nothin' to get you into no trouble," observed the Fligsidian simply.

"I think not."

"I've heard of smugglers and gamblers and such like. I hope you ain't none of them. If you've got any secret sin on your heart, Brothool Zan Fadron, you can tell it to me."

Zan Fadron laughed.

"It's a secret, but not a secret sin; it's a trade secret."

"I'm used to trade secrets," said Thovas Tho. "My daddy was an illegal drug runner before he got religion."

"One of my trade secrets is this: I am wondering how it will be possible for me to make a journey across the Sedna Mountains from Lapis Lazuli and not allow my trade rivals to know what I am doing?"

Thovas Tho studied for a moment and said: "Are there any lost unbelievers on that route, Brothool Zan Fadron?"

"Unbelievers are not lost in the outback, Gentlevir; you may get lost, but usually they know exactly where they are."

"Glory to the Forerunners," observed the colporteur conversationally; "then why couldn't I take the route you want to go, Brothool Zan Fadron, and you could come along as my Outoolian language interpreter and general assistant."

Zan Fadron looked at the Fligsidian as he proposed this exceedingly simple method of gaining complete obscurity. He had never thought of making his explorations in the outback in an humble role. Like most well-to-do ools the thought of leaving his own sphere never occurred to him; yet it was the easiest, most natural device possible.

The colporteur scrutinized Zan Fadron's face closely, and saw that he had gained. "You see, Brothool Zan Fadron, the Forerunner Lords have sent me a berth on the caravan, an assistant and an interpreter all at one whack, bless Their holy name." His drawl had a genial triumph.

Zan Fadron's mind came back to the matter in hand, and a certain human duty he owed Thovas Tho. "I must warn you, Gentlehomo, I am going into an unsettled country."

"That's all right, Brothool Zan Fadron. I come from an unsettled darkoid."

"There may even be grave danger. You might come back dead, or you might never come back at all. I'm not just talking about rival caravan companies. There may also be hostile tribes and hostile zenocs, especially hostile zenoc warlords."

"They tell me the martyrs wear the brightest crowns of anybody in the New Forerunner Paradise, Brothool Zan Fadron. I only hope I'll be considered worthy to die in Their cause, bless Their holy name!"

"All right, we'll try it." He arose briskly. "Meet me tomorrow at zero nine hundred hours at Quay 19 on the west side. The caravan Solar Queen departs at eleven hundred hours and thirty minutes, Zaspian."

Thovas Tho extended a brown hand and shook hands on the bargain after the fashion of Fligsidian miners. Zan Fadron had an impulse to tell Thovas Tho how to get to Quay 19, but he did not. Somehow he had an impression, that if Thovas Tho should walk out and jump on the first car passing, it would be a limited express for Quay 19. So, Zan Fadron gave no directions, but offered an offdarkoid, noncarcinogenic cigar to the colporteur, which is the Lapis Lazuli fashion of sealing a compact. Thovas Tho looked at the squarp-skin case curiously, took out a cigar, inhaled its aroma, then put it back. "No. I put away the filthy weed when I turned to the Forerunner Gods, Brothool Zan Fadron." Here he hesitated a moment, then went on resolutely: "Do you think it's right to smoke, brothool? Suppose the Forerunner Lords should call you home, would you like to enter the pearly gates smellin' like a tobacco factory?"

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent pressed his lips together in a sudden quirk and looked up to consult a surging flare of Zur An's Detectives Who Never Slept. Those wide-awake sleuths restored the agent's poise. "Gentlevir Thovas Tho," he queried, "just what perfume do you suppose the Lords would prefer?"

The Fligsidian Darkool pondered seriously. "I always imagined lilac. There's a lilac bush growing right inside the front door to our greenhouse at the Thovas Tho Mine. Me and Ludia Faba were married under it."

A few Zaspian minutes later, the Darkools Thovas Tho and Zan Fadron were in a nearby expedition supply store buying muleteer outfits for their junket across the Sedna Mountains. The caravan agent bought thoroughly. His purchases extended right down from warmly insulated, camouflage-colored ponchos; improved, night-vision, ocular implants; pulse rifles and stun pistols; to the tasseled goad used by muleteers. It was used to goad grimposauri into compliance. A grimposaurus looked like a cross between a mule and a clawed dinosaur. The Sedna Mountain Range was renown for its treacherous terrain. For climbing and descending the steep and the rocky, a grimposaurus was even more adept than the Terran mule. Furthermore a grimpo could carry much heavier loads.

Zan Fadron believed, no doubt, that he donned the costume purely for the purpose of guarding his identity and his business secret, but the gay clothes flattered two of the personas which were wrapped up inside the caravan agent, namely the Poet and the Masquerader. He put them on in the back room of the store where

he bought them. When he glanced into a dusty mirror, the image he saw caught and held his eye. It gave him a queer sense of having stumbled, quite unexpectedly, upon that youthful, romantic Zan Fadron who had entered the offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. four and one half Zaspian years prior. Over four long years; then he was only twenty-one years old. Now he was twenty-five.

As he stood and looked into the glass, came that strange realization that his youth, his immortal youth, had slipped from him like a worn garment. The hands of the clock of his life were not turning backward. Looking into the mirror, his gaze slightly lifted toward the top of the mirror. There he saw a reflection of a clock on the wall behind him. The hands of the clock were moving backward! He nearly swooned. In his lungs a message instantaneously arrived at the miniunit inside every cell of every alveolus. Upon arrival, each message met a miniunit at minimum oxygen generation. At such a level, seventy percent of the expanded-lung volume was filled with the nitrogen of the darkoid's all nitrogen atmosphere. Each miniunit instantly switched from minimum to maximum, causing expanded-lung volume to soar from twenty percent oxygen to almost one hundred percent. Thus every deep "inhale" was in fact bringing in practically nothing from the outside air. He was virtually breathing pure oxygen, providing a danger to an unwise smoker, since oxygen was extremely flammable.

He had to catch himself from falling. To quickly get more blood to his brain, he bent over, placing his head between his knees. To get more oxygen into his brain, he took several deep breaths. He snapped out of it. He closed his eyes. In his mind's eye he could see two clocks. The hands of one were turning opposite the hands of the other; clockwise, counterclockwise. A feeling of dire urgency swept through him. He vividly recollected his recurring dream that the girl he loved was in an outback canyon. She was in urgent need of him! He must get to that canyon! Thank the Void! His caravan was leaving in the morning!

Thovas Tho woke him from his reverie by drawling that they had yet to hire both muleteers and grimposauri. As for the colporteur, his camouflage-colored poncho, his new night-vision implant, his new wide trousers, his new weapons, affected him not at all. The ool might have been born a grimposaurus. But, Zan Fadron's costume affected him both physically and mentally. The loose freedom of the poncho lifted his spirits; in the wide trousers his legs felt fit for running and jumping; his increased night-vision ability made him eager to be far away from the powerful Lapis Lazuli streetlights that glowed twenty-four hours a day, every day of the Zaspian year.

As he walked along the heavily illuminated Lapis Lazuli streets in his new Outool garb, he felt kinship of costume with the occasional Outool seen mingling with the metropolitans. This kinship of costume made him realize that the human Outools were homo sapiens like himself, which is a remarkable realization for a

Lapis Lazuli upper-level business executive. He understood their supple swinging walk and the way they carried their goads along their arms. He shifted his to that position.

CHAPTER 6

She had landed at the spaceport, Lapis Lazuli, ten Zaspian years prior. The government of her home planet, Blektofir, had sent her here. She was a clandestine intelligence agent and an undercover law enforcement officer. Among other things, she was tasked to enforce certain death penalty sentences issued by the courts of her homeworld.

Her government had passed certain laws designed to maintain and improve the reputation and image of the honorable citizens of Blektofir in the eyes of the interstellar community. One of these laws prohibited any Blektofiran from publicly dancing naked offworld. While no ool would think of ever trying such an indecent sin on Blektofir itself; nevertheless, a few females had sailed away to other worlds and hired out as nude dancers in nightclubs, flaunting their naked genitalia before the gaping eyes and faces of eager spectators. When word of this sin reached back to the homeworld, lawmakers were outraged, swiftly passing laws making such sin a death penalty offense. On point of fact, it was not the nakedness that was illegal; it was the lascivious display of the nakedness for pubic entertainment that was illegal.

In fact, all citizens of Blektofir went naked in public as a matter of everyday routine. They just didn't wave their genitalia in offensive ways. The courts of the land, empowered to hold trial with the accused in absentia, had done so, awarding sentences of death to numerous offworld female nightclub performers. As a rule, Darkools are proud Gentlesaps and very protective, one for the other. When a nightclub owner placed a desperately urgent call for help, the forces of the constable Hoolk Venqueb rushed into action, seizing a starship and boarding it seconds before a planned takeoff. In it were three female Blektofirans in chains. Each had been employed as a nude dancer in the bars of Lapis Lazuli. Also wearing the hats of prosecutor, judge and jury, Hoolk Venqueb passed sentence within an hour of the boarding.

The captain and crew were enslaved; the ship and its contents forfeited. A day later the ship had a new name, a new captain, a new crew and was a permanent addition to the space fleet of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. Justice was swift on Yoovellus. The spaceport's mediums, psychometrists, clairvoyants, necromancers, and various other types of psychics, attributed the success of the operation to the metaphysics of the spaceport's namesake. It seems that the captain had denied the intelligence agent's request to immediately lift off. The captain saw no harm in waiting five more minutes for several large containers of lapis Lazuli gemstones

he had purchased earlier in the day.

The clandestine intelligence agent and undercover law enforcement officer was hauled into the personal presence of the constable. ''Gentlefem, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, I've heard you have a doctorate in brainwashing. Is this correct?'' interrogated Hoolk Venqueb.

''I am a medical doctor who has received a specialty diploma in a branch of medicine dealing with memory drainage and implantation techniques. My world uses these methods on convicted criminals. Hence my government hires specialists such as myself,'' she answered, struggling to mask her anger and disappointment.

''I see. Doctor, I'll give you a choice. You can give me your word of honor to be loyal to me, and go to work for me in your specialty, or I'll enslave you, drain your memory, implant a new persona, and tonight you'll be dancing naked in one of my bars in Lapis Lazuli, flaunting your sexy genitals before my honorable and horny customers. You shall not waste my time thinking about it. I need your decision now.''

A very disgruntled look came over her, and her posture slumped as she said: ''You have my word of honor that I will always be loyal to you. I'll go to work for you in my medical specialty.''

He nodded to one of the cyborgs standing behind her. The cyborg gave her a squarp-skinned case. She took it, opening it. She took the offdarkoid noncarcinogenic cigar out of it. She placed the cigar between the halves of her horny beak, and said with a deeply humiliated overtone. ''Thank you, Gentlevir.''

After several years of good performance brainwashing thousands of ools into slaves, she received one of her routine summons before her employer, Hoolk Venqueb. He looked at her from top to bottom with more silent scrutiny than ever before. She was a beautiful specimen of her species. Her species was one of twenty-three species of spacefarers from the planet Blektofir. Two of the rescued dancers had been of her species. One had been of another. Because of a large human clientele, the bar patrons in Lapis Lazuli called a member of her species an ''Octopus'' because of nongenetic similarity in appearance with a certain Terran beast. He noticed the ornament-like device on her gills. He knew its function. Water traveled out of her gill's exit hole, through the ornament, and then reentered the gills via the entrance hole, freshly oxygenated with all carbon dioxide removed. She was a water breather. The ornament enabled her to function comfortably in an atmosphere. She was beautifully colored in shades of green, blue, and brown. She would have earned him a lot of pulsars as a nude dancer. ''Gentlefem Doctor Hogveb Zunil, have you complied with my instructions concerning the brainwashing of Gentlevir Vosos Vos?''

''Yes, Gentlevir, everything took perfectly. I used the download you requested.

It worked fine. His name has slipped my mind; if you want it I'll consult my Implunt..''

''His name was Kal Pavan. He was Senior Exec in my firm's offices here in the city, until I discovered he was embezzling from me.''

''Yes,'' nodded Doctor Hogveb Zunil, ''that was the ool. I substituted the new name of Zan Fadron and added and deleted history. As you wanted, I copied Kal Pavan's memory download, and used the copy to edit and implant into Vosos Vos. Substantial editing was needed. Everything has been going as planned.''

''And what about the Gentlevir Zah Kah'than?''

''I had difficulty with his. It required five takes. Interspecies shifts are almost always difficult, but his was considerably more difficult than usual. I had to do a lot of editing. That was all on what you had termed 'Stage One' of the project. Stage Two was a nightmare of unexpected difficulties, partly because I had never done such a thing before. Following your instructions, I visited the office of Chameleon Technologies, Ltd. A Chameleon Tailor custom-made a Chameleon suit for me. He taught me how to use it. I hate it. The first time I was in the out-of-phase hovercoffin, I nearly lost my mind. It wasn't just the claustrophobia; it was claustrophobia plus the fear that I might be stuck in out-of-phase limbo forever. Nevertheless I conquered my fright. I learned how to teleoperate the matter-projected avatar beneath the coffin. It took me a week to master a believable avatar of one of my own species. It took me three more weeks to master a believable human avatar. So, as you had ordered, I took a holo of Zah Kah'than to the Chameleon Tailor. He made a Chameleon suit which would fit him. I took it with me. I drained Zah Kah'than's memory. I implanted the download you wanted; the one from the ool who had converted to the Church of the Forerunner... .''

''No, no,'' interrupted Hoolk Venqueb, ''he did not voluntarily convert. He touched a certain Forerunner artifact that projected an energy field into him which mentally coerced him into conversion.''

''I stand corrected. Anyway, Zah Kah'than is now Thovas Tho, a devoted disciple of the Church of the Forerunner. I taught him how to use the Chameleon suit. I taught him how to teleoperate the human avatar which you'd selected. He practiced for two weeks until finally he had a believable avatar. The Meta whom you sent to me, the one who holds a specialty in psychocreativity, performed just fine. He put on his psychoenergetic helmet and psychokinetically coerced the planned meeting between Vosos Vos, who is now called Zan Fadron, and the human avatar which is teleoperated by Zah Kah'than who now believes he's Thovas Tho.''

''Did either suspect that metapsychic coercion had been used to arrange their meeting?'' questioned Hoolk Venqueb.

''No. We monitored their conversations very carefully. Zan Fadron thinks the meeting was just a freak coincidence. Thovas Tho believes they were led to the meeting by the Forerunner Gods.''

"And what about Gentlefem Finema Dova?" enquired Hoolk Venqueb.

"I did as you ordered. I drained her memory. I implanted the male persona that you had selected, the muleteer. Both she and the Meta are at the caravan's first scheduled stop. When the caravan arrives, the Meta will try to metaphysically coerce a planned meeting. She learned to use the Chameleon suit quickly. Her male avatar is very convincing, with excellent skills as a muleteer."

"How about Stage Three of the project?" queried Hoolk Venqueb.

"Stage Three was another nightmare. Thank the Void that we only had to run Thovas Tho and the female through Stage Three. Would you be so kind as to explain to me exactly where those two doppelganger chambers are physically located?"

"I wish I knew! Indeed I do. I do not know. I've pondered the question a lot for many years. If you can think of a way that we could discover their whereabouts, please come to me and tell me. Until then we will continue to use them according to my orders. As long as we have no problem disappearing through the portals, entering them and exiting from them, we don't necessarily need to solve the mystery of where they are."

"Hummm, well," continued Doctor Hogveb Zunil, "I took the Instantcourse which you had made on the subject. Then I went through the portal. I vanished for a second and reappeared somewhere in the universe inside a stone chamber, just as the Instantcourse had shown. I operated the doppelganger machine with no problem. I stepped onto the hovering field. I walked to its center, as taught. The expected view appeared like an apparition around me. I tried to keep walking forward past the center, but the hoverfield instantly began acting like a treadmill. Although I was still seemingly walking forward, my body was actually staying in the center of the chamber. I could move to the center of the hoverfield, but never one step past it. The center of the hoverfield was the same point as the center of the chamber. At the moment I reached the center, my doppelganger appeared. It stepped right out of my own body. My doppelganger was not affected by the hoverfield's treadmill-like effect. My doppelganger kept moving forward. It mimicked my every move. At the center, I began to see not through my eyes, but through my doppelganger's eyes. The view was as if my doppelganger were about to walk back out through the portal that I had entered. All was dark except what I could see through the portal. My doppelganger stepped through the portal into the room. I could look down and see my doppelganger's body. I could even touch my doppelganger's body. I could grasp objects with her hands. I could feel the objects with her fingers.

"My doppelganger left the room and it went everywhere that I wanted it to go; everywhere that I seemed to go on the hoverfield. As she walked into the streets of Lapis Lazuli, the scenery around me on the hoverfield would instantaneously

change accordingly. The simulation had fabulous visual resolution and magnificent tactile pseudoreality. People and objects looked, sounded and felt very realistic, even though I knew that I was only feeling, seeing and hearing them through her. She precisely and simultaneously mimicked everything I said and did. I said words to ools. My doppelganger repeated these words simultaneously. I used the instructed technique to turn the doppelganger machine off. It shut off perfectly.

"Then I went to the corner of the chamber, and put on my Chameleon suit as you had ordered. My human avatar appeared as I vanished into the out-of-phase hovercoffin above the avatar. My avatar activated the hoverfield. My avatar mounted it and did everything I'd previously done, but this time with my avatar's doppelganger, not with mine. But using the Chameleon suit, together with the doppelganger machine was not in the Instantcourse. Had you ever done that before?"

"Negative," answered Hoolk Venqueb. "I feared to try. Forgive me but you were the first guinea pig."

Doctor Hogveb Zunil was visibly upset. "That was extremely unethical of you!" she complained angrily.

"Much less unethical than your coming here to execute my employee for performing an innocent dance in my bar," replied Hoolk Venqueb forcefully.

"As a doctor, I am obligated not just to do what is ethical, but also to obey the laws of my homeworld and the decisions of its courts."

"I disagree. As a sapient you are obligated, as are we all, to disobey such unethical laws. Furthermore you had an obligation to obey the laws here. The laws here said dancing was perfectly legal and that it was illegal for you to arrest someone here for it!"

Hogveb Zunil was noticeably agitated but she did not reply.

"However, let me inform you that the doppelganger machine and the Chameleon suit are both Forerunner technologies. The general rule is that Forerunner technologies are compatible with each other and can be simultaneously used without harm to the user. So let that give you a little bit of comfort. Did you instruct Thovas Tho and the Gentlefem on the use of the doppelganger chambers?" asked Hoolk Venqueb.

"Yes. You ordered me to take the doppelganger Instantcourse and improve it, combining with it a course on Chameleon suits, and especially on making avatars believable. I made the Instantcourse and tested it on four slaves. They completed the course in sixty seconds, and needed less that an hour of practice for a believable avatar if the avatar was of their own species. Then Thovas Tho and Finema Dova took this Instantcourse. I took them, one at a time, through a portal, and watched them operate the doppelganger machine. They are both experts already in the simultaneous use of both the doppelganger machine and the Chameleon

suit. They are each in a separate doppel-ganger chamber at this moment.''

''I see. So, it is actually Finema Dova's Chameleon suit's male avatar's doppelganger who is at the first caravan stop.''

''That is correct, Gentlevir.''

''And Thovas Tho's Chameleon suit's avatar's doppel-ganger is walking the streets of Lapis Lazuli.''

''That is correct,'' replied Doctor Hogveb Zunil.

''When is the caravan due to depart Lapis Lazuli?''

''Tomorrow morning, Gentlevir.''

''I'm very happy to see that you are accurately informed. Also I'm pleased to see that all my orders have been carried out. Now, listen to this order. Go to Zan Fadron tonight in his sleep. Switch his slave program into zombie mode. Take him to the third doppelganger chamber. Give him your new Instantcourse. Select a male human avatar for him that does not look like him, but is of the same height, age, and build. Be certain that he is very proficient in the simultaneous use of both the doppelganger machine and the Chameleon suit before dawn. Then leave him in the chamber, sending his Chameleon avatar's doppelganger out to get his things together and catch the caravan. Go to the other two chambers and show Thovas Tho and the Gentlefem a holo of Zan Fadron's avatar and zombify an order to them that they are not to remark upon his change of appearance. Do you understand?''

''Yes, Gentlevir, I understand perfectly.''

''So,'' continued Hoolk Venqueb, ''tomorrow morning the caravan Solar Queen departs with Zan Fadron's and Thovas Tho's Chameleon avatars' doppelgangers. The Gentlefem's Chameleon avatar's doppelganger awaits them at the first caravan stop where, unknown to her, and unknown to them, also awaits the Meta who will attempt to metapsychically coerce the three into a meeting, hopefully resulting in her joining them on the expedition. Am I correct?''

''That is perfectly correct, Gentlevir.''

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From the west side of the spaceport, Lapis Lazuli, the caravan, Solar Queen, lumbered off from Quay 19 to begin its sojourn into the Yoovellian outback. It consisted of twenty xirquanodons, lined up in one long line, following one after the other. Within a few Zaspian minutes they had reached their standard cruising speed for level, unobstructed terrain, one hundred miles an hour. Occasionally the lead beast would move aside and draw back to reenter the line at the very rear. Thus they shared the wear and tear equally, since it was the lead beast who shattered the most hooves and legs against boulders and other obstructions. Thank the Void that xirquanodons could slough off an injured leg and rapidly fold down a new one. They had truly superb regenerative abilities. Furthermore, since each beast

had one thousand legs, a few missing would not slow the animal down.

Twenty-two days after departure found the Darkools Zan Fadron and Thovas Tho standing together on top of their xirquanodon. They were just outside of the gondola car they shared together. The gondola was somewhat igloo-shaped, although more elongated. It had been formed by physiological engineering techniques when the beast was first born. Breeders had blown a type of high-tech bubble into the carapace.

The walls of the bubble were a strong forcefield. Every Zaspian day, the forcefield would expand a fraction of an inch, increasing the size of the bubble. This expansion would trigger rapid growth of that part of the carapace surrounding the bubble. The carapace was made of chitinous bone that was thick and very hard. After several years a very strong gondola was completed. Its wall, floor and ceiling were strong, yet still living tissue. Attached in the middle of the inside ceiling in each gondola was a flat plate. This plate was a generator that, among other things, projected a molecular integrity forcefield into all sides of the gondola, greatly strengthening them. The forcefield plus the chiton bone provided effective armor against many forms of heavy weapons.

Zan Fadron stood, leaning back with his feet wide apart, letting the tether take some of his weight. He shifted his body slightly, leaning forward just a little. This movement eased up on the tension of the tether, giving a little slack. For a moment it was not quite as tight as usual. During this moment he reached down with his left hand to grab hold of his tether. He then released his right hand from the same tether. He leaned back again, pulling the tether taut once more, letting it take some of his weight again. It felt good. He felt balanced. The upper end of the tether was attached at his breastbone to the sturdy harness that he wore. The lower end of the tether was attached to an anchor that had its roots deep into the chiton bone of the xirquanodons's carapace. This tether held him to the beast, preventing him from falling off. Each ool had a tether. Without a tether one might slip and fall off. At a xirquanodons's cruising speed, there would be no get-up-and-climbback-ons.

Such prevention was especially welcome during a sudden gust of wind. Moving one hundred miles an hour, is traveling at an awesome speed for a land animal. If the caravan is headed into a one-hundred-mile-an-hour wind, anyone standing on top would feel the force of a wind blowing two hundred miles an hour, which is the same wind force that ancient Terran skydivers felt, jumping from high altitudes. Without goggles, the eyes constantly stream rivers of tears, and flapping clothes become painful whips. Keeping a tight tether, holding it with one hand, is a very good way to steady a standing ool on the back of a running xirquanodon. Such a stance made it a pleasure to look up at the twinkling stars in the blackness of outer space, or to turn on one's night-vision, retinal implant and

gaze out over the breathtaking landscape, watching it rush by. His night-vision implants had three modes: The first mode was strictly the amplification of existing, ambient light such as starlight. The second mode was a laser-like device that would shine a beam of light into the field of vision. The third mode combined the first two modes.

"I love my new night-vision implants!" screamed Zan Fadron at the top of his lungs.

"Brothool Zan Fadron," Thovas Tho yelled loudly back. "I like them too. They're a little better than the ones I had, but If I was you, I'd narry turn on my high-beamers up here!"

Zan Fadron looked into the eyes of the colporteur and saw by the fact that his eyes were not aglow, that he had his highbeams off. But, Zan Fadron loved his highbeams. He not only had them on, he had them on maximum intensity. He wasn't about to turn them off. He could see the landscape better with high beams, especially on full strength. His friend could certainly be foolish at times. Suddenly he heard a loud report in the far distance, muffled by the wind. In the same instant he felt a bullet graze his left ear as it sped by, whistling. He hit the deck, scrambling for rungs. He shut off his highbeams, as he was rapidly crawling for the entrance to the gondola. He swatted madly at the button to release the line on his tether. A sniper had used the glow of his eyes to target him! He rapidly scurried inside the gondola, with Thovas Tho following quickly on his heels. Zan Fadron threw his back against the wall and came to rest in a sitting position, gasping for breath. Thovas Tho did the same.

"Brothool," gasped Thovas Tho, "when the Forerunner Lords send us a warning, it is up to us to heed it. An ancient proverb says: 'A word to the wise is sufficient,'"

"I beg your pardon, my friend," gasped Zan Fadron with sincerity, totally humbled.

One week later the caravan Solar Queen arrived at its first scheduled stop on the established route. It is an Outool settlement known as Azak Nak, named after its founder. It is a village of geodesic domes, Quonset huts, and various other designs. It is several blocks long, has two plazas, and several stores. Plaza Sisk Lun, the marketplace of the village Azak Nak, is a colorful, noisy place set in the cold brilliance of powerful lights atop tall poles. A babble of bastard Zaspian, Fligsidian, Quelsian, and Horgadilian dialects fill the air. The air is rank with the smell of animal ammonia, straw, droppings, cows, horses, mules, burros, and a host of zenoc beasts, including grimposauri. The Darkool buyers and vendors are about sixty percent human; the remaining forty percent being zenocs, cyborgs, androids, and robots. They come and go with strings of donkeys, mules, high-necked llamas, grimposauri, and other zenoc and nonzenoc beasts. Over the plaza are pon-

chos and other Outoolian garb of every color: greens, yellows, oranges, reds, stripes, checks and fanciful designs. There is much hat and cap tipping, and courtly address between all Darkools, rich or beggarly, in this land where work is held in high esteem. Darkools have not failed to realize best the dignity of simple existence apart from the ability to grab riches.

On the south side of Plaza Sisk Lun is a heavily built stable of adobe, fronted by an arcade. In the western end of the long arcade, half a dozen Outool girls, wrapped in brilliant mantillas, sold wakantey, a popular local spicy food, at little tables. Beside them on the bare packed earth boiled caldrons of the peppery stuff. A small portable oxygen generator helped fuel every caldron. They fired their pots now and then with dried animal droppings, and no sooner had they finished their task than they scooped up a double handful of peppers to throw into the stew, and next moment ladle out fiery portions to their Darkool customers.

A little way from the wakantey tables, out in the plaza, a Horgadilian jockey rode a bucking grimposaurus youngling. The fellow had on a green velvet jacket. He sat the animal carelessly, and in the midst of its leaps and stiff-legged falls, he extolled to a prospective buyer how well broken the zenoc beast was, what an amiable disposition the grimposaurus possessed, how it would work from tageeg to sunsubeer (dawn to twilight) without so much as backing an ear, a willing grimpo, a sincere grimpo.

Amidst this oratory and bucking, he found time to flash a smile of brilliant teeth at the wakantey girls. Zan Fadron wondered vaguely if he were too old to ride like that. The jockey was some twenty-three or four. Then the caravan agent's attention wandered to a llama that was hissing like a snake; then to a man tying a stone to a jack's tail to keep it from braying.

As a background for this kaleidoscopic scene arose the cone of the volcano Ahoneekip far to the east. Out of its crater spewed gaseous discharges, flashing sliver and purple. Against this rose the geodesic domes, and Quonset huts of the village, the twin towers of the cathedral, the weather observation bureau on top of the Asrem building, and the monastery of the Gray Friars. From the height of the volcano there swept down great ridges of tufa that embraced the village in vast bluish arms. Zan Fadron's attention to the landscape was diverted by Thovas Tho's call to him.

The colporteur was bargaining with the roan in the green jacket to hire his grimposauri for the expedition. The jockey's Zaspian language ability had flickered out among the higher numerals. Zan Fadron walked over and picked up the conversation in Horgadilian.

"What do you want for your grimposauri, Gentlehomo?"

"Where do you wish to go, Gentlehomo?"

"West, through Etneirok, past the Sekrio Vampiro..."

The expression on the vendor's face stopped Zan Fadron.

"Not the Sekrio Vampiro?"

"Yes, on through the Nukitas into Rilzrak."

The Horgadilian looked at Zan Fadron with a loose jaw, and said: "The Gentlevir is mad!"

"I was never clearer-headed."

"Then you have never been to the Sekrio Vampiro."

"No."

"I have."

"Then you'll make the very guide."

The Horgadilian stroked a polished black mustache and broke into a nervous laugh.

"Gentlevirs, the ool who has been in the Sekrio Vampiro makes no guide at all. He has learned his lesson. I would not go there again for two hundred pulsars a month."

"I'll give you a hundred and fifty."

The Darkool in the green jacket frowned and pulled hard at his mustachio. His black eyes seemed to be staring at something disagreeable.

"But, Gentlehomoes, I warn you," he flung out, "that is a zenoc vampire country. In that place... ."

"I've heard so," interrupted Zan Fadron, indifferently.

"It is not hearsay with me," declared the Horgadilian warmly. "Look... ." He stepped nearer Zan Fadron, bringing with him the odor of zenoc beasts and of his own unwashed body. "Look." He tipped his head to one side and the movement drew the skin of his neck up from under the greasy collar of his green velvet coat. This drew a peculiar withered spot on the skin into view.

Zan Fadron looked at it uncomprehendingly.

"A zenoc vampire, Gentlevir, right over that big vein," explained the vendor. "My friend discovered it just as I lay stretched out breathing my last. The beast was as big as a large man. It had wings. It was fluttering over me, fanning me deeper into my last sleep, when he rushed up and beat it off with a stick. Ah, Gentlehomoes, many a time has Solgat Sol gambled with death, but never before —never before— pardon me, Gentlehomoes, one moment, I think the wakantey Gentlefems are listening. I will explain to them. I could not rest in Heaven if I thought the gentle bosom of any woman held a question unanswered by Solgat Sol."

Here he made rather a fine bow to the newcomers and withdrew to the wakantey stands. Just how Solgat Sol discovered the women were listening Zan Fadron never knew. Solgat Sol's back had been to them. Zan Fadron turned and watched the Horgadilian display the withered spot on his neck. To observe it, the

cream-colored women moved past Solgat Sol in a line, like sightseers at a sideshow. One of them touched the place with the tip of her finger.

During the procession, Solgat Sol gave a new and enlarged version of his adventure with the vampire. After a five minute description of how he skirted death, Zan Fadron heard him say that his last thoughts, just before he lost consciousness, were that a dark-eyed, adorable Darkool madonna was stooping over him, lifting him, pressing him to her bosom with kisses like wakantey. The Gentlefems blushed and gasped, "Wakantey!"

"Yes, Gentlefems, wakantey!" cried Solgat Sol with hand to heart. "And my miserable friend waked me from a dream like that! Damn the Void! How I wish I could have died in such a dream! When I gained strength I was furious! He tried to appease me. I would not hear him. We divided the gold — for the Sekrio Vampiro is lined with gold — and parted."

Solgat Sol cast liquid eyes at the wakantey vendors.

"Can you blame me?"

"It was a very impious wish, Gentlevir," trembled the one who had touched the scar.

Solgat Sol smote a hand on his brow. "A man's brain is a furnace, Gentlefem, when he looks into such black almond eyes; the holy saints do not hold his words against his soul." He gave a great sigh as if he were about to melt into the wakantey girl's arms, then shrugged and said: "Now I must go back and dicker over the grimpos with those ools. No doubt they are Gentlehomoes in their cold fashion, but they think of nothing but grimposauri."

All the girls lifted their eyes to the newcomers and smiled faintly before they returned to their task of collecting droppings for their pots.

Solgat Sol's philandering vaguely annoyed Zan Fadron, yet the agent was a trifle amused at Solgat Sol's Outoolian notion that kisses in Heaven tingled with wakantey. When he thought it over, he was forced to admit that it was more interesting than the idea diffused through Zaspian theology that kisses in Heaven were chilly and infrequent, if, indeed, they were permitted at all. The Horgadilian returned from the wakantey girls with a beaming face. For some reason Zan Fadron began a little brusquely: "I will give you a hundred and fifty pulsars a month, Gentlevir Solgat Sol, and no more."

Solgat Sol seemed a little surprised at such brevity, which is not in accord with Outoolian traditions. He paused a moment, then asked: "What do you want packed, Gentlehomo?"

"Catechisms."

Solgat Sol stared.

"Catechisms? Pack Catechisms out in that devil's country?"

Thovas Tho caught the drift of these Horgadilian words. ''Brothool Solgat Sol,'' he interposed, ''where is a better place for spreadin' the blessed Word than in a land of sin and wickedness?''

Solgat Sol looked at the man from Fligsid.

''Oh, you want the Catechisms packed?'' as if he did not find that so incomprehensible.

''Yes, I hope I am one of Their chosen vessels, Brothool Solgat Sol.''

''And what do you want packed?'' enquired the muleteer of Zan Fadron.

''I am his helper,'' said the caravan agent.

''You are what?''

''This Gentlevir's assistant,'' repeated Zan Fadron with a certain pointedness.

Solgat Sol looked from one to the other, plainly incredulous, and also speculating. Presently he began again.

''It is noble work. May I ask, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, how long you have been in the business of selling Catechisms?''

''We don't sell them... .''

''We're spreadin' the Word and sowin' the seed,'' interpolated Thovas Tho earnestly.

The Horgadilian nodded and said: ''Certainly... spreading the Word... very well.'' Here he took each of his prospective employers by the edges of their ponchos, and with a confidential nodding of the head led them farther away from the crowd. The smell of zenoc beasts again wafted to Zan Fadron. When at a safe distance, the muleteer glanced around and began in a half tone: ''Gentlehomoes, men do not risk their lives in the Sekrio Vampiro without a cause. You come from Lapis Lazuli to go to the Sekrio Vampiro, to distribute Catechisms, that is your cause, is it not?''

''Yes,'' agreed Zan Fadron impatiently. ''If you want to take us....''

''One moment! You are Darkools. You come from Lapis Lazuli to Roduaca, dress up as grimpers and go to the Sekrio Vampiro to distribute Catechisms, that is your cause, is it not?

''Look here!'' snapped Zan Fadron. ''If you'll take us, say so. If you won't... .''

''Do not feel nervous, my friend,'' soothed the muleteer. ''All is well. You are most fortunate... ah, you are most fortunate to fall in with Solgat Sol, an ool of infinite discretion. Any other grimper would wonder why two Darkools disguised themselves as grimpers to carry Catechisms into Sekrio Vampiro country. They would be curious... .''

''To save lost souls,'' interposed Thovas Tho.

''Whose lost souls?'' asked Solgat Sol cryptically.

"Why, just any lost soul," replied Thovas Tho, a little at a loss. However one of his pet phrases came to his aid and he added, "The harvest is white, but the laborers are few."

Solgat Sol nodded with a faint dry smile, pulling down his mustachios. "Surely. What simpler? I am discreet. I do not ask what is in your Catechisms. I do not ask what you are going to do with them."

"We're going to give them away," said Zan Fadron.

"Precisely, give them away in the Sekrio Vampiro. Trust my discretion. I have never been any too good friends with the Patrol myself, and I shoot very well with a needler".

Here he reached into the back of his green jacket, pulled the lining around and cautiously displayed the butt of a very modern automatic.

"I'll go for five hundred pulsars a month," he concluded.

"Look here," cried Zan Fadron, caught off guard at this jump. "We're not afraid of the Patrol!"

"Neither am I, Gentlesap." Solgat Sol tapped the tail of his jacket.

"I mean the Patrolmen are not after us."

"And they will not be, Gentlevir, trust my discretion, if you hire me."

This last phrase was put so significantly that Zan Fadron thought it best to put down his rising temper. It was clear the Horgadilian was prepared to bring down the Azak Nak village Patrolman on them unless they came to his terms. An investigation undoubtedly would expose Zan Fadron's identity. The fact that he was traveling incog from Lapis Lazuli would be headlined up and down the outback. He would have to give over his plan or reconstruct it with an infinity of precautions. Solgat Sol watched the caravan agent's face. "Only five hundred pulsars," he suggested, shrugged, and spread his hands. "What is five hundred pulsars to Darkools of Fligsid and Lapis Lazuli, who are rich and always in a hurry?"

Zan Fadron decided this was the cheapest secrecy in sight. "All right, we start tomorrow."

"But wait," interrupted Thovas Tho. "I can not afford to pay two hundred and fifty pulsars a month just for grimposauri."

"I'll fix that," said Zan Fadron.

"Yes," nodded Solgat Sol, "your lowly assistant Catechism giver will fix a tiny thing like that, Gentlevir Thovas Tho."

"Praise the Forerunner Lords," said Thovas Tho.

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Solgat Sol's bit of blackmail turned out, on the whole, rather a stroke of luck for the expedition. The Horgadilian muleteer was useful in translating the dialects of the Outools. When the grimposauri and their Catechism packs were in the moun-

tains, Zan Fadron found his Instantcourse-learned languages of little service. Not only did the Outools not understand his Instantcourse-learned languages, they also didn't understand the two major languages in that region of Interstellar space, namely Zaspian and Quelsian. Furthermore they distrusted anyone who spoke these two languages. Four centuries of slavery, peonage and inquisition had crushed out of the Outools the last shred of faith in the Quelsians and the Zaspians.

Undoubtedly the Mountain Outools are the most wretched ools on the globe. The villages through which the colporteurs passed were mere kennels of adobe and stone stuck up on the mountainsides. The adobe was made from dirt, water, and straw. The dirt was had by crushing rock and scooping up dust-like mounds that sometimes lay in drifts. The water was obtained from a molecule-assembling machine. These machines were small, cheap, and portable. No Outool tribe or village was without at least several of them. Almost every family had at least one. There had never been a shortage of them on Yoovellus. The straw was made by drying plucked Hopeless vegetation. The three ingredients were mixed together to form mud bricks which were lain out to dry. The very dry atmosphere dried the bricks relatively quickly.

In an atmosphere like Yoovellus, where it is very dry, and never rains, such bricks are nearly eternal. Along the more abrupt heights in these villages were strung rudimentary stone and adobe fences to keep the children from dashing into space and being killed below. The houses themselves were dug partly in the earth and were without windows so the observer looked down into black kennel-like holes. Smoke poured from these holes because there were no chimneys. The smoke was a clear sign of fire. Since every fire needed an oxygen generator, one instantly knew by the numerous smoke columns that these cheap portable machines were abundant here. Such excavations formed the home, stable, poultry house, sty, dog-kennel and zenoc-beast kennel all rolled into one. It pleased Thovas Tho to buy a hand bell in Lapis Lazuli and he made a processional through these miserable villages, and sometimes singing the hymns so popular with rural revivals. Of course the Church of the Forerunner had changed certain words in the traditional hymns.

The Fligsidian's penetrating nasal yowling and his bell formed a clamorous introduction to these villages. As he passed through at the tail of his grimposauri, anything was likely to pop out of the huts to view the disturbance — a pig, a milk goat, a dog, a gamecock, one of a host of zenoc animals, an Outool woman followed by the rest of her tenants, for all held equal tenure in these motley domicilliaries.

A robot popped his head out of his hut, peering through his smoke (why would a robot have a fire?) to respectfully observe the traditions around him, and thereby be welcome in the community. The robots were among the very proudest of their

flaming cauldrons and often loved to have visitors in their huts. Of course, the opposite type of robot would have been bashed to pieces long ago. Justice is swift and harsh on Yoovellus. The Outool housewives who heaved themselves up into the cold mountain star-twinkle were sometimes svelte and fit, and at other times shapeless creatures; both types weaving ponchos for their lords out of certain fibers of certain Hopeless plants, of wool; or weaving hats, with the fibers spraying off at the point of labor.

Some housewives were very attractive with a fierce mountain beauty; others were ugly with an ugliness that was appalling. Of course, surface appearance does not imply a lack of inner beauty. Indeed it was often the case that the ugly seemed more welcoming to strangers. Among the brood of both types, there would be almost surely two or three dark-eyed, sad-faced girls, who came out with the pigs, goats, and zenoc beasts and stood staring at the strange procession.

It was these girls coming out of the crevices in the rocks that made this groveling existence human to Zan Fadron. Often these girl faces held that strange quality of wistfulness that belongs to youth and maidenhood. Of what they dreamed, Zan Fadron could not imagine. What they were to become, he saw too plainly: Hags and nonhags; either in a hole, some svelte and fit; others used and shapeless; in either case, flowers crushed in a sty.

And Thovas Tho came along and gave them little Forerunner religious books. The futility of the gift, the fanatical earnestness of the giver always struck Zan Fadron with a sad irony. Sometimes he would wonder if by any possible means the little Catechisms could be of the slightest moral or intellectual value to these girls.

He never thought of any of the other denizens except the girls. Their faces always gave him the impression of something delicate and precious being wasted. Thovas Tho, however, had much wider sympathies, no doubt because he was a father of both boys and girls. Between villages, trudging at his grimposaurus' tail, he would talk of his beneficiaries.

"That was a fine chunk of a boy," he would say. "I hope he will read that Catechism and grow up into a preacher." Or, "That was a good-hearted old Gentlefem with the red shawl. I hope she sees the light and I meet her in Forerunner Paradise." Thovas Tho used this last phrase so much, one could say he tramped at a grimpo's heels through the Sednas, extending invitations to Outools to meet him in Forerunner Paradise.

By no means all, but certainly many Darkools looked on any type of Heaven as medieval nonsense, but Thovas Tho, through his interpreter, talked of it so earnestly, so concretely — apparently he was acquainted with the pearly gates down to their hasps and hinges — that at intervals a strange fancy drifted across the caravan promoter's mind, that maybe, somewhere, there was such a place, somewhere, and he would look up at the icy-cold peaks freezing against the abyss of

the void.

Without Thovas Tho, not one Catechism could have been given away. The first village they entered refused to accept a single book. The Outools thought it was some new trick of priests to bring down on their heads new and devastating ecclesiastical dues. However, Thovas Tho's eloquence reassured them. He explained that he and his assistants were good Darkool bank robbers who were giving away Catechisms as penance for their sins. The Outools, thus assured that they were dealing, not with priests, but with simple cutthroats, gained confidence and took the little books.

By the time the expedition had camped two nights on the trail, word, somehow, had passed ahead of their penitent and benevolent mission, and the colporteurs found the Darkools eager for the Catechisms. In fact, on two occasions, the little books themselves had been passed on ahead of the expedition. In one village, the ools found an Outool who had a bullet wound in his arm. He had bound one of the Catechisms tightly over the place. He declared to Thovas Tho that all pain left him when he applied the book. On the following day they discovered an Outool woman, who was expecting confinement, drinking a tea made of Catechism leaves.

Thovas Tho caught these patent miracles to his heart, and overflowed with thanksgiving in both prayer and song. He saw himself an evangel attended by the hosts of Forerunner Paradise. He would stretch a string of miracles through Roduaca and prepare the way for — as near as Zan Fadron could get the idea — for an enormous revival. For a while Zan Fadron argued mildly with Thovas Tho about the authenticity of these miracles. He attempted to explain to Thovas Tho that the patient was probably healed by the workings of their own subconscious minds, but in the gulf of the subconscious, Zan Fadron quickly lost his own bearings. As for Thovas Tho, he had no idea what subconscious meant. He rebutted everything by his unassailable argument: "If the Forerunner Lords wanted to work miracles with Their Catechisms, They could, couldn't They?"

After, that, Thovas Tho recommended his books as a nostrum for all the ills of the flesh. As Zan Fadron trudged day after day, behind his grimposaurus, goading it on under its pack of Catechisms, there were times when he felt that he was moving in some kind of delirium and would presently awake, with a high fever, no doubt, in his Lapis Lazuli apartment. At the end of eight days' journeying, the expedition was widely advertised. At each camp came Outools bringing gifts; chickens to cook, potatoes, mangoes, or cups of delicious hot drinks, even a special tea made from the leaves of a Hopeless plant that only grew at extremely high altitude. Hence, the tea leaves had been brought down by grimposauri from the freezing-cold fields five thousand feet higher up.

As they journeyed farther and farther west, the villages became more widely

scattered, for they were reaching the fringe of Roduaca civilization, which is the department of Etneirok. At the village of Solenak, an Outool boy offered to carry a sack of Catechisms over to Oejub, the last civilized village in that direction, and allow the colporteurs to go a different route. The Darkools of Solenak told strange tales of the country beyond Oejub. It belonged, they said, to a tribe called the Vajiros, who fed strangers to their gods.

Thovas Tho interrupted these tales with pious ejaculations: ''Lead me to my chosen field, O Forerunner Lords! Show Thy power to the heathen Vajiros!''

The more terrible were the stories of the men of Solenak, the more determined Thovas Tho was to go on. On the ninth morning the expedition reached Oejub. A handful of wretched Outools lived here, and by some miracle the expedition's coming was known to them. The whole village met the colporteurs. After each ool had received a Catechism of medicinal and spiritual value, the Oejubians implored the three ools to go no farther. They would surely be lost in the infernal land of the Vajiros.

By this time, Thovas Tho was harrying his grimposaurus in his eagerness to reach a post of genuine danger and miraculous service. The expedition was soon on its way again. One of the Oejubians, an Outool named Obmo Eno, attached himself to the colporteurs for several hours. As they ascended the rising slopes of the western range of the Sedna Mountains, Obmo Eno told Zan Fadron a most fantastic tale, which he hoped would turn back the adventurers. This was the tale: When Obmo Eno was a boy his mother died. He consulted a monk as to the state of her soul and was shocked to find that she was probably still in purgatory. Ten masses might win freedom for her. Unfortunately, Obmo Eno did not have enough money to pay for ten masses, so he took three. Now every one in Oejub knew that the Sekrio Vampiro was lined with nuggets of gold the size of a man's head, but the difficulty was, it all belonged to the King of the Vajiros, or that is to say, to the devil.

Obmo Eno explained his predicament to the monk, and the good man told Obmo Eno if he would learn a prayer to subdue the devil, he could probably go to the Sekrio Vampiro, get the gold, and return to safety. Obmo Eno agreed to this, so the monk, who knew all sorts of prayers, taught him a prayer, and the Outool set out. Sure enough, he found the valley of the Sekrio Vampiro scattered with gold. He filled his packs so full his poor grimposaurus could scarcely crawl, since the grimpo's saddle's antigrav unit had stopped working. He goaded the beast at every step and cursed it by all the saints in the calendar, but unfortunately black night fell upon him before he was clear of the land of the Vajiros. So he camped, taking out of his backpack his tiny water generator and his cup. He filled the cup with hot water. He put in his high-altitude tea leaves. He refreshed himself with the invigorating taste of high-altitude tea, said the prayer seven times, then

wrapped himself in his poncho and fell asleep. He had the most horrible dreams.

When he awoke, his bags were gone, and his grimposaurus hung to a giant Hopeless redwood tree by a cord, strangled as if it had been a sparrow. Who could pull a grimpo up a tree by a cord except the devil? Obmo Eno had the presence of mind to cut off a piece of the cord as proof of his story and then fled the place. At the conclusion of this extraordinary narrative, Obmo Eno drew from under his poncho his embroidered bag of high-altitude tea leaves, opened it and displayed the bit of cord he had salvaged from the tragedy. It was a piece of very strong silk cord of exquisite quality about a Zaspian inch and a half long, greasy from years of handling.

The caravan promoter looked at the shred of silk around which Obmo Eno had woven such a fantasy. He avoided expressing his skepticism by enquiring after the present state of Obmo Eno's mother's soul. Obmo Eno hoped the good Darkool woman had been in Paradise for several years. During the last mile or two, Obmo Eno had talked with a certain nervous haste and many glances out over the boulder-strewn mountain side. Now that he had finished, he walked on a bit farther with some desultory conversation, then made his adieus and turned back to Oejub. At first he moved off on the return trail with sufficient dignity, but the farther he got from the travelers the more quickly he stepped. At seventy-five paces, he began to trot. At a hundred yards he was in full flight, running as if the very King of the Vajiros were on his heels. The colporteurs watched him curiously, until his poncho diminished to a bit of fluttering red far down among the gray stones, and he vanished around a turn in the trail.

CHAPTER 7

Obmo Eno's flight down the mountain lent a certain authenticity to his story which his words had failed to convey. For several moments, Zan Fadron stood looking down the trail, speculating on what the Oejubian could have seen years ago that sent him homeward today at such a scamper. Then, too, the fact that Obmo Eno possessed a piece of silk cord grew upon the promoter as rather inexplicable. Troglodytes, such as these mountain Outools are not given to silks. Thovas Tho accepted Obmo Eno's narrative in word and substance. The Outool had adventured with the devil, and straight ahead lay the battleground where he, Thovas Tho, would meet and conquer the infernal hosts with the sword of the Forerunner spirit. He prodded his grimposaurus forward. What daunted the Outool Obmo Eno only spurred the zealot Thovas Tho.

The terrain up which the expedition toiled smacked of Obmo Eno's narrative. It was of volcanic origin and it stretched upward as scoriated as the slopes of the Zaspian volcano Fohneel itself. It was a formidable landscape. It appeared to Zan Fadron as if a vast, gray flood had been transfixed in stone in the instant of tumul-

tuous descent. In one place its stony waves still lashed at the sky; in another, huge swirls from some long cooled maelstrom still held its contour; in yet others washes of vitreous green slag simulated the troughs of a stormy sea. This huge and strange terrain led upward, apparently to a plateau, which formed a pass through the stony barricade of the Sedna Mountain Range.

A cold wind swept down from the stony fields and worried at the ools' ponchos and at the Catechism packs. The trail which they had followed so far ceased to exist on the lava field. They worked upward by guess and chance. Their progress upward became a tortuous ant-like twisting with endless hesitations, back-turnings and retracings. Indeed the hugeness of their surroundings dwarfed men and grimposauri to the proportions of insects. They might very well have been a little string of ants creeping upward on the obscure and twiddling errand of such creatures. It all must have affected Thovas Tho's imagination as the very outlands of Forerunner hell. He was a Parsifal riding against the battlements of Klingsor, or rather, since the Fligsidian's mind was untouched by the Wagnerian cycle, he was a child of the living Forerunner Gods, challenging the regents of Sin and Death.

Zan Fadron often looked at him, a short, compact, red-skinned ool with oily black hair, shoving at his grimposaurus, steadying his pack and shouting his lugubrious hymns. Zan Fadron often examined him so, and the thought came to the Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent more than once that the first apostles of the Church of the Forerunner, the Darkool and spacefarers who had made these Catechism packs possible, must have been just such tough, persistent, indomitable rustics. At other times the promoter in Zan Fadron asserted itself. He thought of the slave and tourist trades. He envisioned these cyclopean scenes unrolling beneath the hull of a dirigible. What a tourist-catcher it would be! It would soon install itself in the world's imagination as one of those obligatory tours, such as the Quelsian Alps, the Timyos Canyon on the planet Zasp, the Pyramids of the planet Mudelia, or the Zaspian theaters of Novstratford on Novavon, which all real personages perform, thereby dispersing any doubt as to their culture.

So absorbed became the caravan agent in this idea, that he would lose consciousness of his struggle upward, of his slippery charges up glazed redoubts, of his shovings at his grimposaurus' flank. In his imagination he would be floating in a Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. airliner high above these discomforts.

The ant meditated wings. In his mind's eye, he was standing in the Zeppelin's catwalk, using his highbeams on the breathtaking landscape. Behind him on the bulkhead were two clocks, one with hands running backward. Beside him was the wondrous girl in his recurring dream. If only he could make out her face. A sudden feeling of desperation snapped him out of his reverie. He had a burning need to be in a canyon, but which canyon, where? Near rest time the exploring party reached the level of the pass. Once up, their going was easier. Here the lava

had weathered to a thick powder, and even a little Hopeless grass broke out, like a sort of greenish scum on disturbed waters.

The relief from climbing and the refreshing sips of high-altitude tea picked up the spirits of the expedition. Solgat Sol, at the flank of the lead grimposaurus, broke into whistling a gay incontinent fandango. He supplied the castanets by snapping his fingers, and then, charmed by his own music, fell to twisting and swinging his hips as he walked, or rather capered along. Thovas Tho, who followed the Horgadilian, stopped his hymn singing at this lickerish pantomime and watched his fellow muleteer in righteous disapproval. Condemnation was written in the Fligsidian's very back and stride.

Zan Fadron, who brought up the rear, was tired from his climb, but this little dumb show amused him. He walked beside his own grimposaurus with heavy legs. Also he tilted his foot a little to one side, to protect a new blister that had formed on his left great toe. However, the color of the dying awake period presently weaned his mind both from the little comedy and from the trifling discomforts of his own body. With his low-beams on, only ambient, existing light was amplified. Thus the starlight twinkling through the mountain defiles behind him gave him the impression of enormous hoses playing streams of gold upon the peaks ahead, while to the western sides of the mountains clung the night like a blue bubble due to a dust storm in the far distance.

Presently Zan Fadron's attention was drawn from this splendor by the sound of Thovas Tho exhorting Solgat Sol in a queer mongrel of Horgadilian, Fligsidian, Zaspian, and several Outoolian dialects that had been met along the way. In the rarefied air, their voices came to him thinly. Like so many well-meaning persons, Thovas Tho had endured the dance, and had suppressed his irritation to the breaking point; it had now become impossible for him to request the Horgadilian courteously to stop.

The first sentence Zan Fadron heard was Thovas Tho's nasal explosion —"Look here, Brothool Solgat Sol, don't you know the devil is firing up his grill this minute, for such sinners as you are!"

The Horgadilian stared around at this thunderbolt out of a starlit sky.

"Why is he, Gentlevir Thovas Tho?" he enquired in a most amiable mood.

"To roast them dirty dances out of you!"

The Horgadilian drew a bit of shuck and tobacco from his green jacket and gravely began a cigarette. The shuck and tobacco had, laced throughout it, countless numbers of heat-activated, oxygen-generating pellets. He lit it with an oxygen-generating cigarette lighter.

"I know persons, Gentlevir Thovas Tho, whom the devil himself couldn't roast a dance out of."

The colporteur looked at him hard.

"If you are trying to throw slurs on my soupleness, Brothool Solgat Sol, I'll have you understand there ain't an ool around Thovas Tho Mine, Fligsid, that can tear down 'Cotton-Eye Ool' slicker than I can." Among darkoid miners, this expression referred to a popular type of dance, named after miners who took unwise and often illegal stimulants and intoxicants that produced a cottony look to the lens of their eyes, similar to the beginnings of cataracts.

"I'd enjoy seeing it done, wouldn't you, Gentlevir Zan Fadron?"

Zan Fadron was too wary to be led into the discussion.

"Brothool Solgat Sol, I wouldn't shake a leg in 'Cotton-Eye Ool' or 'Turkey In The Straw,' not for all the filthy pleasure this world can hold."

Solgat Sol inhaled luxuriously on his cigarette, "Gentlevir Thovas Tho," he said in a muffled voice, talking the smoke out of his mouth and nostrils. "If you really could dance, you would not be so prejudiced against it. That is always the way. Fat ools dislike the fandango; stiff ools abominate the waltz; awkward ools... ."

"Look here, Brothool Solgat Sol, when I say I can dance, I can dance."

"Still, it's easier to talk than to dance."

The colporteur looked straight at the muleteer, seemed to make up his mind, and the next moment began humming one of those monotonous jumbles of sound such as the fiddlers among the miner-folk of the darkoids Fligsid and Xorbeenus evoke. Next moment he gave a whoop, leaped into the air, clicked his heels together three times and landed on the tufa in a darkoid miner's breakdown. Amid the majestic surroundings, his stocky dancing figure formed a grotesque spectacle. Thovas Tho squatted on his heels, shooting out his legs like pistons.

"This is 'Lovin' the Void!'" he shouted at the skeptical Horgadilian. Suddenly he half rose, and retained the posture with hands and feet crisscrossing in a flurry of agility.

"'Plantin' Hopeless Seed!'" he yelled.

When this was established to a machinelike virtuosity, he shifted and began switching in his toes.

"'Deep In The Shaft!'" he called. "And now I'm 'Minin' Gold!'"

Here he fell into a motion of such swiftness that he jiggled up and down like a marionette. He seemed to blur. He seemed to have four flying legs and two shadowy heads. It was the most remarkable exhibition of strength and agility Zan Fadron had ever seen. At first he was amused and amazed. Then his amusement ceased. Jigs or breakdowns among the Darkools of Fligsid, Xorbeenus, and Horgadil are really expressions of their harsh, arid lives. They are awkward, fantastic, and are based on a sort of grim travesty of the labor of the miner-folk, the movements of mining robots, or the antics of the miner's zenoc and nonzenoc animals; such as

turkeys scratching in the straw, hogs dashing around caves, or miners stooping in weariness over sterile, stony mine debris. But the dancing of these grotesque steps is a feat of strength.

Zan Fadron was too sensitive not to catch the vigorousness of soul among a people who could evolve such a dance. That vigor was written not only in Thovas Tho's steps and furious leaps and jerks, but it was in the radiant, vivacious face which he maintained throughout the performance. It was a dance on how to conquer desolation, or how to avoid blind graceless reaction against suppression.

It formed an illuminating commentary to Zan Fadron on all the mouthings of Forerunner hellfire, Satan's power, eternal damnation, everlasting flames, and a hundred other revivalistic catch-phrases he had heard fall from Thovas Tho's lips. The jig held a spiritual message in its loveliness. What Solgat Sol thought of this Fligsidian dance, he gave only slight indication. His hard-to-restrain affirmative nod, and his not-quite-repressed smile revealed that he secretly was quite pleased. His Darkool courtesy probably repressed a desire to make joking light of the truly magnificent performance. Thovas Tho stopped as abruptly as he began, exhausted. His thick-barreled chest heaved. For a moment he stood staring at his audience of two.

"Gentlevir Thovas Tho," began the Horgadilian, "that was a... an unusual dance, a remarkable... ."

He broke off because Thovas Tho's face underwent a queer change. The colporteur whitened under his sweat. Amid his panting he gasped out: "Forerunner Lords! What have I done? Merciful Gods, what have I done? Me, a vessel of the Blessed Truth!" He lapsed into the silence and the stoicism of his kind.

Zan Fadron looked at him. Such remorse was written even in his hard-lined face that the agent was moved to express a doubt whether such an acrobatic performance was a dance.

Thovas Tho shook his head gloomily. "I know you mean well, Brothool Solgat Sol, but the devil is using your tongue to lead me to destruction. The devil is right here, watching us this minute. He's here! Right now! Just as shore as when he choked Obmo Eno's grimposaurus!"

The colporteur's gesture, the look of the huge, igneous pass, and the memory of Obmo Eno's tale, all helped produce an illusion of some veritable malign presence. Thovas Tho caught his grimposaurus, which had backed away from its master's uncanny performance. The little company started ahead again, but the incident completely removed all lilt of gaiety that had inspired them. Solgat Sol resumed his lead. He seemed to be pondering something, and presently he said: "Gentlehomo, Thovas Tho, you have a queer religion, mostly about the devil."

"He is our arch enemy, Brothool Solgat Sol. See how he tempted me to take pride in my strength; lowly worm of the dust that I am."

"Surely there is no harm in kicking one's legs?"

"Suppose my blessed Redeemers had called me home while I was jigging like that? Don't you know I would have gone as straight to hell as you'll go when you die, heathen though you be, and child of the living Forerunner Gods though I be."

Thovas Tho's continual contrast of his own righteousness to Solgat Sol's sinfulness pricked the skin of the easygoing Horgadilian. He seemed about to retort when he broke off abruptly and the forward grimposaurus came to a halt; then it began to back away with that down-dropping of its haunches characteristic of frightened grimposauri. Solgat Sol remained staring downward. Thovas Tho came up with him and fell into the same transfixed gaze. Zan Fadron hurried forward and a moment later joined their amazement.

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The Blektofiran female Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, entered into the personal presence of her employer, the male Nanotyranus, Hoolk Venqueb, in response to one of his routine summons. "Gentlefem Doctor Hogveb Zunil," began Hoolk Venqueb, "so, how went affairs after the caravan Solar Queen stopped at Azak Nak?"

"Everything," responded Doctor Hogveb Zunil, "went as planned. We've been quite fortunate. The Gentlefem Finema Dova is now a member of the expedition in the form of her Chameleon suit's male avatar's doppelganger. In Azak Nak, the Meta, once again, put on his psychoenergetic helmet and psychokinetically coerced the three ools into forming one expedition together. The Meta reported that very minimal intervention was used, and that the three might very well have banded together on their own."

"I see," mused the Nanotyranus. "Is Gentlefem Finema Dova consciously aware that she is on a hoverfield in a Forerunner doppelganger chamber?"

"Absolutely not. I've followed your orders to the letter, to not permit that under any condition."

"Very well," nodded Hoolk Venqueb, approvingly. "Is either of the Gentlevirs Vosos Vos or Zah Kah'than consciously aware that he is on a hoverfield in a Forerunner doppelganger chamber?"

"Again, absolutely not. Your orders clearly proscribed that. I've done the exact same thing to all three ools in that regard. In each of the three, I've routed all activities in the doppelganger chamber through the dream center of the brain. I've installed a block so that the dream cannot be recalled by the conscious center of the brain. Therefore it is impossible for them to be aware of anything happening in the doppelganger chamber. And unless you have me remove the block, or otherwise inform them, they will never know."

"Excellent," complemented Hoolk Venqueb. "Are any of the three consciously

aware that they're in a Chameleon suit and that they are in an out-of-phase invisible hovercoffin which is hovering above its projected, visible, and in-phase avatar?"

"Certainly not," replied the Blektofiran. "Your orders prohibited that firmly. I have complied fully."

"Outstanding," praised Hoolk Venqueb. "Now I have a question about each of these three ools, Vosos Vos, Zah Kah'than, and Finema Dova. This is a question about their subconscious dream-center personas. Is either of these three dream-center personas aware that he is a dream-center persona and not a conscious-center persona?"

"No," answered the female Octopus, "they're not aware of that. Dreams seem just as real to all of us as reality does. Said three dream personas firmly believe that they are normal conscious-center personas. They haven't the slightest clue, as far as I can tell. Of course, as you ordered, all three brains in the chambers have their slave programs switched into zombie mode. The zombie program is extremely sophisticated with a multitude of neuronic fail-safes and security redundancies.

"It goes without saying, that this whole project has been extremely difficult and enormously complex, yet you've never told me, Gentlevir, why you want this done. Is this just an experiment to see what is possible by combining the two Forerunner technologies; the Chameleon suit, and the doppelganger chamber?"

"Well," answered the Nanotyranus, "that is part of it, yes, but that's not all of it. It's certainly not the most important part by any means. Let me ask you a question about the three faces that are present today, not in the chambers, but in the outback expedition. Imagine for a moment that a zenoc warlord had a spy who was a member of a local tribe and lived in one of the small settlements or villages that the expedition is now passing through. Imagine that this spy were under standard orders to secretly record a holo of the faces of any traveling outsider. Imagine that the spy were to record the holo images of our three colporteurs. The spy takes the holos to his zenoc warlord. The warlord views the holos and listens to what the colporteurs have been doing. He then decides to kill or capture them.

The expedition returns to Lapis Lazuli before being apprehended. So, the zenoc warlord sends hit men to wander the streets, bars, and parks of Lapis Lazuli until they recognize one of the three faces. The hit men capture one or more of the three, downloading memories, and thereby learn who their boss is and who you are. Then the hit men assassinate me and you — end of story. So, here's the question: If such a scenario played itself out, would the hit men ever be able to recognize any of these three faces in Lapis Lazuli?"

"No, of course not," responded the doctor with certainty, "The faces of the three avatars now in the outback expedition were copied from real flesh-and-

blood humans, but humans who are presently either dead or residing offdarkoid. So once the avatar simulation stops running, the hit men could wander the streets, bars, and parks of Lapis Lazuli forever and not recognize a face. However, one must always keep in mind here that we didn't just provide different faces; we implanted a new memory in the three ools in the chambers. Furthermore, it most definitely was not just a new memory; it was a very complete personality of a real human being, together with all his knowledge, instincts, desires, beliefs, and experiences. So theoretically it might not be just a face that were recognizable in your scenario."

"Good point," acknowledged Hoolk Venqueb, "so when the avatars vanish, their personas do not vanish from within the heads of our three ools in the chambers. In order to make the recognizable personalities vanish, we would have to drain them and implant a different one, correct?"

"That is correct. It's an easily done procedure, as you know. Once the recognizable faces and the recognizable personas vanish, the hit men would search forever in Lapis Lazuli and find nothing."

"Doctor Hogveb Zunil, perhaps I should inform you that this exact scenario has actually played out on numerous occasions in the last few centuries here on Yoovellus. Many of my predecessors have been assassinated in this fashion. Even more numerous have been the assassinations of ools who were not my predecessors and had nothing to do with me or any predecessor of mine. Many of these assassinations were the result of only one complaint on the part of a zenoc warlord; that the ool had been a trespasser in the domain of the warlord. To very many of the zenoc warlords in the outback, trespassing is a capital offense for which a hit man will be sent into Lapis Lazuli to execute the sentence. Certainly not all of the zenoc warlords are like that, but most of them are.

"I had the Senior Exec in my firm's Lapis Lazuli offices, Gentlevir Pul Uxtar, give my orders to Zan Fadron. The orders were to take an expedition into the outback to survey a route for my firm's Zeppelin air line. I had already negotiated agreements with all the zenoc warlords along the proposed Zeppelin route, except for the very last one. This last zenoc warlord, at the very end of the route, has a long history of employing spies, issuing death decrees to trespassers, and sending hit men into Lapis Lazuli to assassinate. By commissioning this expedition, I have placed myself, Pul Uxtar, you, and everyone who works in my Lapis Lazuli offices in very grave danger. The complex scheme of this project, among other things, serves to protect you, me, and Pul Uxtar from an execution. It is imperative that you do absolutely nothing that would enable that warlord to trace those three trespassers back to us here. Our very lives are on the line, including yours. Do you understand, Gentlefem?"

"I understand perfectly. I see much more clearly now. Thank you for your clari-

fication. I will take extra pains to be careful. I don't wish to be executed; I've been enjoying life in Lapis Lazuli."

"I shall bid you adieu now," said Hoolk Venqueb. "Thank you for your report and for your very wonderful work. Good day, Gentlefem."

"You are welcome. Good day, Gentlevir."

****

Before the trio, the plateau dropped away into a vast chasm. The abyss was as unheralded as the Timyos Canyon on the planet Zasp, and appeared more prodigious. How deep it was, Zan Fadron could form no idea because an undefinable mist had curtained its profundity. Its width, he was equally unable to gauge for the same yellow haze veiled its westward reach. Although Zan Fadron was twenty feet from the brink, a sense of vertigo caused him to back away.

After a long gaze, Solgat Sol said: "Gentlevirs, this is the end of the trail."

And Thovas Tho replied: "If we are forced to stop here, brothools, it is because I have just proved myself an unworthy vessel."

A faint mirth stirred in Zan Fadron's brain. "I fancy this chasm would have been here, Thovas Tho, if you hadn't danced."

"That may be true, Brothool Zan Fadron, but the Forerunner Gods in Their foreknowledge must have foreseen that I would fall from grace just where I did, and They prepared this huge holler as a signal of Their divine displeasure."

"Preparedness," said the caravan agent soberly.

"If They don't show me the way across this bottomless pit tomorrow," said the Fligsidian darkool somberly, "I'll know my name ain't recorded in the Book of Life."

At that moment from far down in the darkness of the abyss there shot up into the eyes of the travelers a beam of scarlet light. It looked as if it were shining out of immense depth. It stared out of the very bowels of the earth.

Solgat Sol gasped and crossed himself. A shivery sensation went over even Zan Fadron himself. Only Thovas Tho entirely kept his courage. He advanced to the margin of the abyss calling on the Forerunner Gods to burn the filth and wickedness out of his heart. At that moment the light winked out as abruptly as it had sprung into view. It gave Zan Fadron the impression that the bowels of the darkoid had closed over it. The promoter stood looking down into blackness.

"How deep is it?" he asked of nobody. A thought came to him. He drew out his chronometer and marked the second indicator in the instrument's yellow light. "Heave over a stone, Solgat Sol, I'll measure its depth by seconds."

The Horgadilian shook his head. "No, Gentlevir, I'd heave over a stone and crush an ool's head at once, but when the King of the Vajiros stares up at me, that's different."

"Chuck something in, Thovas Tho."

The ool from the darkoid Fligsid picked up a ten-pound boulder and flung it into the abyss. Solgat Sol backed away as if expecting some monster to emerge from the emptiness. The two Darkools stood listening ten, fifteen, twenty seconds, but no sound ever returned from the plummeting stone. Zan Fadron slowly restored his chronometer to his pocket.

"I don't guess it's got no bottom, Brothool Zan Fadron," said the Fligsidian, who took such a phenomenon quite simply.

The trio set about pitching camp. With this friendly task, the caravan agent shook off somewhat his feeling of the abnormal. He and Thovas Tho put up the tent, unrolled the bedding, and brought out the portable oxygen generator for a campfire. Solgat Sol tethered the grimposauri and gathered Hopeless grass for their provender. Next, he set off to hunt for Hopeless wood for the campfire. At last the three ools got down to their own supper, while looking up, mystified by an unexplainable carmine glow emanating from certain peaks, and comparing it to the few pale stars that glittered over the shoulders of these same peaks.

After supper the ools sat speculating on the light they had seen in the profound. The beam had not suggested fire. The caravan promoter ran over a list of possibilities: a phosphorescent display, a searchlight, a signal fire, a vent in the volcano, even some type of laser. Solgat Sol was convinced that he had looked into the baleful eye of the King of Vajiros. Even to Zan Fadron, Obmo Eno's story did not seem so improbable now as it did in Oejub. Thovas Tho was the gloomiest of the three companions. He had seen the gates of Forerunner hell gaping at him as a reproof because he had driven another set of spears into the sides of the Forerunner Gods by his wicked dancing.

From what the agent could gather, Thovas Tho believed that the abyss and the mysterious light were created by the Supreme Lords for the single and particular purpose of rebuking his ungainly antics. Such vast and unconscious egotism amazed Zan Fadron. He tried to show the colporteur the infinite disparity between a man's ephemeral tenure of life and the ageless foundations of the darkoid.

"Brothool Zan Fadron," drawled the revivalist, "I'll be resting in the bosom of the Forerunner Gods when these here mountains are blown down into the bottom of yonder basin." He looked up at the immemorial peaks standing dark against the star-powdered sky.

The caravan agent sat looking at the fellow with his oily black hair gleaming and winking in the gleam and wink of the firelight. Thovas Tho was warming himself by a couple of fagots. Nanobot intracellular heaters were, of course, essential, and did their job. But they did not work in such a fashion as to prevent one from enjoying the radiating heat from fagots in such a miserably cold place. Thovas Tho was simultaneously warming to fagots and forecasting his existence for eons

to come. The essential irony of it filled the promoter with a kind of melancholy.

"I hope They forgive me my sin, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"I hope so, Thovas Tho."

"I'm going to wrastle with Them in prayer tonight. I'll wrastle all night or git my answer. If They send Their miraculous power and help me down into this bottomless pit tomorrow, so's I can spread Their holy Word, I'll know They've received me as Their child again. I'm sorry I displeased Them, Brothool Zan Fadron."

The promoter allowed the conversation to lapse, and smoked a cigar to dull his thoughts for sleep. As the campfire died down, the caravan agent wrapped himself in his blankets and settled himself for the night. Thovas Tho got up and went outside to his prayer. The caravan promoter lay awake for upward of an hour, looking at the coals, watching sparks flare into tiny brilliance and die, listening to the drone of the colporteur's prayer as he prayed never to die. He looked off into the distance and saw on the horizon two twin peaks. In his mind's eye, he saw one begin a slight gyration in a clockwise direction, and the other peak, counterclockwise. Zan Fadron never knew quite when he fell asleep, or whether he fell asleep at all or not. It seemed to him that one moment he heard the colporteur outside praying, and the next, Thovas Tho was by his side, shaking his shoulder and flashing an electric torch in his face. Thovas Tho was undressed and evidently had been in bed. Now he leaned down and whispered to Zan Fadron that something was bothering the grimposauri.

The caravan agent got to attention with difficulty and after some blinking reflection managed to enquire what the grimposauri were bothered about. The Fligsidian did not waste speech, but aroused Solgat Sol by flashing the light in his face. The Horgadilian sat up suddenly, gasping out: "Gentlevirs, she is innocent… do not imagine… ."

The Fligsidian hustled his companions into their faculties and bade them listen outside. The men listened. In the direction of the grimposauri they heard a queer scratching and a padded humping. The caravan promoter was not impressed that anything could be done until the colporteur opened the flap of the tent and motioned his companions to follow him. Zan Fadron crawled out of his blankets without enthusiasm, found his shoes, then followed shivering into the cold night air. The term "night" to a Darkool does not have the same definition that Planeteers connote to it. A darkoid, having no sun, has no "dawn," "sunset," "twilight," "day," "night," "daytime," "nighttime," et cetera by Planeteers' definitions. But by every Darkool's definitions, these things all exist on darkoids. To a Planeteer, these terms relate to actual, not metaphorical, sunrise-sunset phenomenon. Among Darkools, things are exactly reversed; these terms relate to metaphorical, not actual, sunrise-sunset phenomenon. But these Darkool connotations are much more than just metaphorical; they are deeply emotional, historical, and traditional. Such a Darkool

mindset helps to ward off a disease that was the cause of one of the first plagues on darkoids: the major depression associated with cicada-cyclical mental breakdown, which is, in turn, caused by the absence of regular periods of alternating lightness and darkness. Rigorous mental disciplines and traditions were put into place to fight this plague, hence the enforced usage of these old terms by new meanings. A "day" to a Darkool is the half of the twenty-four hour cycle that all of the darkoids's Darkools have universally agreed is the time to work, eat, and play, with appropriate generation of artificial light to facilitate these activities. To a Darkool, "night" is the other half of the twenty-four hour cycle, in which, generally speaking, one rests, sleeps, or retires and all artificial lights are either turned down or turned off, except when need prescribes otherwise. To a Darkool, "twilight" is the beginning of the rest period and the ending of the work period; "dawn" is the ending of the rest period and the beginning of the work period.

There was no moon. The conformation of the lava lay uncertain in the starlight. The colporteur walked toward the grimposauri playing his light in front of him. It illuminated the burned ground for twelve or fifteen feet, then faded into darkness. He had his night-vision, retinal implants turned off. He did not want to see a repeat of the incident on the xirquanodon where Zan Fadron had been targeted by a sniper by the glow of his night-vision implants. The two ools behind Thovas Tho shivered from the chill. Presently the three dark figures behind the spurt of light could see the bulk of two grimposauri lying down. By this time all unusual sounds had died down. Zan Fadron was inclined to get back to his blankets. But with a countryman's persistence, Thovas Tho stood switching his light here and there, looking for the third grimposaurus.

"H-He can't hobble far in his tether," chattered Solgat Sol.

"Yes, but he may fall over the cliff."

Thovas Tho turned his light in this direction and peered into the darkness. The three stood for several moments, listening, trying to locate the lost grimposaurus when with a sense of relief Zan Fadron saw the zenoc animal's eyes shining some fifty feet back toward their camp. He pointed it out.

"Now we got to round it up careful," cautioned the Fligsidian. "A grimposaurus is a plumb fool at night. We don't want it loping off that clift. We better spread out and git between it and the jumpoff."

The darkools accepted the directions and began a deploying movement around the stray. Zan Fadron kept his eyes fixed on the glowing points and knocked his shins against cusps of lava in the darkness. His climb the preceding day had made the inside of his thighs and his shoulders sore. He kept sidling around his quarry, mentally querulous of his discomfort, when he chanced to observe another pair of eyes glowing beside those of the grimposaurus.

For a full half minute, Zan Fadron kept sidling among the stones, so near asleep

was he, before the significance of these new eyes dawned upon him. By this time he had stepped into a refractive angle where he saw still another pair of sparks glittering at him from the blackness. The caravan agent stopped stock still. A curious tickling sensation flowed from his scalp to his toes. With much crisper steps he got back to Thovas Tho and the light. He reached out and took the Fligsidian by the arm.

"Thovas."

"Yeh."

"Did you know there was something else... ."

"Yeh, I see its eyes."

"What is it, Thovas Tho?" asked Zan Fadron nervously. "You... you understand about stock... ."

"Something layin' flat on that old grimposaurus' neck."

"But what?"

"I got to ketch her and see," whispered the ool from the darkoid Fligsid, and next moment he strode briskly forward. At Thovas Tho's approach the glints withdrew at the rate of the ool's approach; then a strange thing happened. A heavy bumping and thumping set up not at the glints at all, but about ten feet to one side of the stalkers. Zan Fadron was startled. Thovas Tho switched his light on the commotion. Next moment, in the harsh black and white light appeared the body of the third grimposaurus dragging and bumping over the stones. At the same instant Solgat Sol opened fire with his needler. Its spurt of flames stabbed the darkness, and by the position of each flash, Zan Fadron saw that the ool from the darkoid Horgadil was charging whatever man or creature lay before him. The promoter shouted a warning about the cliff. At that moment the needler was exhausted. An abrupt silence took the place of its hard chatter.

Zan Fadron stood staring into absolute blackness, shivering violently. "Solgat Sol," he called. "Solgat Sol!"

Thovas Tho whisked the light about and after a few seconds picked up the Horgadilian on his knees, jamming needle-cartridges into his needler's magazine. He suddenly began cursing a string of Horgadilian curses.

"What's the matter?" cried the caravan agent.

"He tried to lariat me. Him! He threw me down! I'd have got him, Gentlevir! I'd have got the devil himself... Him!"

The two ools ran up and, sure enough, there was a rope around Solgat Sol's legs. He got out with some difficulty. Then they took the electric torch and examined the edge of the abyss for eighty or a hundred yards up and down in front of their tent. It was quite empty. They went back to the rope which had tripped Solgat Sol. It was heavy silk. Then they walked over to the body of the third grimposaurus,

and found a similar cord attached to it. This must have been a sort of tow rope used to drag the brute's carcass toward the abyss. The grimposaurus itself was quite dead. A little further investigation showed the other two grimposauri had also been killed.

CHAPTER 8

The following morning, the three Darkools held a sort of inquest over the dead grimposauri. Zan Fadron examined the top side of one of the brutes, the ools then heaved the body over and the promoter set to work on that side. He made a minute examination, occasionally brushing down upturned scales. He did not find a single cut or puncture or scratch. The three grimposauri lay intact. After some half hour's investigation, he glanced up at Solgat Sol.

"What about strangulation?" asked Zan Fadron

"Not that, Gentlevir," answered Solgat Sol, "its tongue is in its mouth; its eyes are in their sockets; there are no marks on the neck."

Zan Fadron arose stiffly, brushed his palms together in an effort to rid them of the film of oil left by touching the animal.

"Suppose they were poisoned?" wondered Zan Fadron.

"A grimposaurus will not eat at night, Gentlehomo."

"Then what could have killed them?" questioned Zan Fadron, exasperated.

The Horgadilian stared, then uttered: "Perhaps they were scared to death, Gentlevir."

Zan Fadron looked up at the muleteer to see if he were jesting, "What could scare the life out of a grimposaurus?"

The ool from the darkoid Horgadil shrugged, saying, "Who knows Gentlehomo?"

Thovas Tho, who was over among the grimposauri's packs, reassembling his Catechisms into man-sized bundles, called out, "It must have been an ool with a lariat, Brothools, an ool on beast-back. We saw that much."

"We saw their eyes only, Gentlehomo Thovas Tho," corrected Solgat Sol.

"And I saw six eyes," put in Zan Fadron wearily, for they had gone over the beast-man theory several times.

"But you were excited, Brothool Zan Fadron. No doubt you imagined the extra pair."

"Of course that's true, I may have," admitted the promoter, getting out a cigar and biting its end with a nervous snap. "But where did a beast-man come from; out of the abyss, through the air, or up the trail?"

"It could have been a ool riding up from Oejub, who killed our grimposauri and fled, Gentlesap."

"But how did he get away?" cried Zan Fadron. "Did he ride down the abyss, because whatever it was vanished in that direction right under Solgat Sol's needler fire. A man couldn't ride down through space. No grimposaurus... no grimpo in the darkoid... I tell you fellows it was a... a... ."

Zan Fadron's fancy wandered vaguely among condors, wyverns, dinosauri, zenoc beasts. He recalled that darkoid newspapers recently carried reports of strange zenoc monsters discovered on various worlds. These zenoc monsters were prodigious things. Perhaps here on Yoovellus... . Then he thought of the silken lariat and dropped the theory.

"It's bound to be a rodeo rider," drawled Thovas Tho with irritating complacency, "because nothing but a hoss-beast in a zenoc rodeo could drag a dead grimpo and nobody on darkoids can throw them lariats without nooses except rodeo riders."

Both the Horgadilian and the caravan agent turned on the man from the darkoid Fligsid.

"Who ever heard of a rodeo rider with a silk lariat, Gentlevir?" queried Solgat Sol.

"What would a rider from a zenoc rodeo be doing in the Sedna Mountains, Thovas Tho?" interrogated Zan Fadron, harshly.

"Why should a rodeo rider kill our grimposauri, Gentlehomo?" asked Solgat Sol.

"And try to drag them over such a devilish high precipice at night, Thovas Tho?" snapped Zan Fadron.

"You needn't get riled because I think it's a rodeo rider, Brothools," placated the colporteur as he tied a bundle.

Zan Fadron responded apologetically: "Well, no, certainly not."

"Pardon, Gentlevir, but... but the ool who killed our grimposauri must have come through the air. Is this not true, Gentlevir Zan Fadron? And he went back the same way, absolutely, I saw him go," said Solgat Sol.

The caravan promoter relighted his cigar with his oxygen-generating cigarette lighter, and conned this new hypothesis: a flying man; a man who could fly noiselessly. The idea began to paint a new fantasia before Zan Fadron's mind.

"Besides that," droned out Thovas Tho, "I saw this rodeo beastrider laying right down on his beast's neck."

The caravan agent turned in irritation. "Look here, Thovas Tho, rodeo beastriders are few and far between. How can you imagine one would be riding over the Sedna Mountain Range at midnight?"

"And Gentlehomo, Thovas Tho," enquired Solgat Sol, "how could a rodeo beastrider come out of a chasm and go back into it again?"

"Brothools," drawled the colporteur, "if the Forerunner Gods saw fit to punish my filthy dancing by bringing a... ."

"Damn the Void!" cursed Solgat Sol, interrupting him in mid-sentence.

"Blast!" snapped the caravan agent, "I might have known you thought... ."

"Brothool," explained Thovas Tho mildly, "last night, as I wrestled with the Forerunner Gods to get forgiveness for my filthy dancing, I asked Them to send down a miracle if They would receive me back as Their son."

"Well, you got one," agreed the caravan promoter, a little ashamed of his irritation. He walked slowly back to the tent.

This carried him past the grimposaurus with the rope on its foot. It, too, lay scatheless, without a scale injured from ears to hoof-claws except where the silk rope ruffed its right fore ankle. Zan Fadron looked at the attachment of the rope. It was simply wrapped around the dead grimposaurus' foreleg, rodeo fashion, as Thovas Tho had said. He stopped, cut off a piece, and continued toward the tent, examining it. At first it seemed an ordinary cord of silk composed of four strands, but when he unwound a strand and attempted to unravel it, he found to his surprise, that it was not composed of smaller threads, but it was of a colloidal nature and resembled a string of glue or celluloid.

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent looked at it curiously. It was not silk. It was a rope manufactured, so far as he knew, out of some entirely unknown substance by some unknown method. This discovery brought back to his mind the idea that had been edging in when Thovas Tho's remark had interrupted. Was it possible some ool had visited them during the night with a noiseless flying craft? Did an unknown civilization exist in the hinterlands of the Sednas that manufactured a silken cordage out of some unknown colloid?

The moment Zan Fadron hit on this theory, the various threads in this snarl of facts began to straighten. The killing of the grimposauri, the selection of the spot, the light he had seen in the abyss, all became amenable to human and zenoc motives without the need for theories of monsters or devils, or beast-riders in zenoc rodeos.

"Besides that," drawled out Thovas Tho, evidently continuing some soliloquy, "them rodeo riders may have silk lassoes, I don't know ... ."

Zan Fadron was so pleased over his idea, this did not annoy him. He called back cheerfully: "This isn't silk."

"Oh, it ain't," drawled the colporteur calmly. "I thought you said it was."

"I did. But it isn't."

Zan Fadron expected the man from the darkoid Fligsid to ask its material; instead, Thovas Tho merely remarked: "Then you see, maybe the Forerunner Gods did send a rodeo beastrider after all."

Zan Fadron burst out laughing. "No, I don't. This is a new sort of rope, unknown to commerce. I am sure because Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. handles every sort of cordage from sisal to Manila hemp, from Zaspian to Quelsian to several zenoc varieties."

Solgat Sol turned and was staring at the colporteur's assistant.

"The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., Gentlevir; what is it to you?"

Zan Fadron collected his wits. "Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. owns a rope factory in Lapis Lazuli where I used to work and, er, make lines, er — ropes and all sorts of cordage."

Solgat Sot stroked his black mustache, cast an eye around at Thovas Tho and nodded agreeably.

Thovas Tho pursued the topic: "Brothool Zan Fadron, maybe the Forerunner Lords provided that beastrider with a miraculous rope to get me past this bottomless pit made by the devil."

"No doubt, no doubt," and he returned to his study of the rope.

The Horgadilian joined Zan Fadron and helped him study the new find. The two ools walked into the tent to sit and smoke and talk. Thovas Tho continued his work outside.

"This will explain Obmo Eno's story," began Zan Fadron. "Take the supposition of the Vajiros, a small, but highly civilized people here in the Sednas. If they wished to discourage contact with less cultured tribes, such as the Oejubians, would they not post guards in these mountains and kill the stock of travelers in an effort to frighten them?"

"Why wouldn't they kill the travelers themselves, Gentlevir?" enquired Solgat Sol.

"Because they are civilized; you and I, for instance, we would avoid murder to the last extremity."

"Oh, certainly, absolutely," Solgat Sol nodded strongly, "but, Gentlehomo, why do you think the Vajiros are highly civilized?"

"This cordage suggests it. I never saw anything like it in the Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. factories." The agent was rather pleased at the casual way in which he corroborated his own story.

"A noiseless airship would prove it; it would explain why we saw that searchlight in the abyss last night; it explains why our own lives were spared. Just think, they have flying machines which they can use indifferently as a tractor to draw a dead grimposaurus, or to sail away into the far distance. It will be many a year before our civilization duplicates that, my dear Solgat Sol." Zan Fadron had a tenable theory now, and he felt good. He was hitting his conversational stride.

"But, Gentlehomo, I thought Vajiros were the fiends of hell."

"Natural enough, my dear Solgat Sol. No doubt the Vajiros have been working for years trying to inculcate exactly that belief among all the surrounding savages. It's high time some civilized person was getting in touch with these people, negotiating trade relations. Why, great goodness, ool, think of the tonnage from an entirely untouched territory. Great airships could fly right out of here... ."

"Airships! Airships sail out of here, Gentlevir!" cried Solgat Sol in genuine alarm. "Surely, Gentlevir, last night's adventure has not turned your... ." The Horgadilian paused staring at the caravan agent.

"I mean the ships of the Vajiros, the airships," explained the promoter, after a moment. "The sort we saw last night."

Solgat Sol looked away over the chasm before them, then glanced back at Zan Fadron, then at the chasm again. "I see," he nodded.

By this time, both ools felt that the other was not talking frankly, and they dropped the subject of the Vajiros. The muleteer turned to neutral topics: "I wonder what Gentlevir Thovas Tho is going to do?"

Zan Fadron watched him. The short blocky rustic was carrying his newly made parcels one by one to the very edge of the abyss. Both Solgat Sol and Zan Fadron jumped up and started toward him.

"Hey, Thovas Tho, what you want done?" called the promoter. "We make two hands, you know."

The colporteur turned about. "Well," he said with his uncomfortable frankness. "I'm getting ready to go down into this place. I know you two fellows don't take much stock in the Forerunner Lord's work. I didn't want to call on you to do anything."

"I don't like that," cried the caravan promoter. "I'll admit I'm not the enthusiast you are, Thovas Tho, but when I start with a man I mean to see him... . Say, how are you going to get down?"

Thovas Tho looked at him. "I hate to tell you, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Why?" cried the agent, greatly surprised.

"Because when I mention anything about my Forerunner Lords and Masters, it seems like it kinder throws you and Brothool Solgat Sol in a bad temper."

Thovas Tho's drawl was monotonous as usual, but his words painted clearly enough his loneliness of soul. A qualm of self-reproach went through Zan Fadron.

"I'll help you carry the Catechisms to the edge, Thovas Tho," he proffered fraternally, "and you can tell me how you are going to get down if you care to." He followed the man from Fligsid to his bundles, picked up one and started to the edge.

"Well, it's just this," began Thovas Tho with a certain humble boldness. "I'm doing my part in spreadin' the blessed Word among the heathen and I know the

Forerunner Lords'll do Theirs. They'll git 'em down there somehow.''

''You... you expect a miracle to lift these books to the bottom of the cliff?''

''Yes, and me too, Brothool Zan Fadron,'' agreed Thovas Tho simply; then he added. ''You needn't carry none unless you want to, Brothool Zan Fadron.''

''Oh, I'll help.'' The caravan agent's nerves teetered on the edge of mirth, pity for, and wonder at this indomitable monomaniac. Then, with a queer feeling, Zan Fadron recalled how Thovas Tho had simply walked out into Tamen Kun park and waited for a berth on the caravan Solar Queen, and it had come. Now he was just as simply lugging his Catechisms to the brink of the precipice. However, there was this difference between the two events: In Lapis Lazuli, Thovas Tho had one chance in ten thousand. Here, he had none at all.

He had no chance because the expedition had been stopped by the crater of a volcano. Not exactly a crater either, but the sides of a volcano whose top had crushed in some millions of years ago. The ruins of such cataclysms are fairly frequent in Roduaca. This one had left a vast circular hole in the darkoid which appeared to be about a mile or a mile and a quarter in depth and about eighteen or twenty miles in width.

By Darkoolian definitions, in ''daylight'' it did not appear so enormous as at ''sunset,'' but Zan Fadron realized that at ''sunset'' they had been exhausted, sleepy, surprised and without the benefit of fully clear mental faculties. Yet, Zan Fadron had the wisdom to suddenly realize the contrary; that it was the rested, unsurprised, wide-awake vision in ''daylight'' that was the illusion; since, in ''daylight'' it was indeed larger than it seemed. He judged that it must be wider than the Timyos Canyon of the planet Zasp, and perhaps deeper. It was huger than the crater of Aeualik on the planet Quels. In fact, it was not an impact crater, but the circular ramparts of a volcano truncated by its summit crashing into its base. That long-gone catastrophe left a vast concavity, with walls five or six thousand feet high that leaned strongly inward. Into this impossible place, Thovas Tho expected to be translated. Alternating his night-vision, retinal implants between high-beam, low-beam, and two-beam, he could see that the walls of this enormous barricade were colorful with a red cast that varied into grays and blues. The vast circuit was molded into strange architectural shapes, something like the mesas of many worlds.

Its bottom was lined with a Hopeless verdure which showed vividly green, even from that great height. This green expanse was broken only in a place or two, and by a lake near the center of the volcano, and a stream that led away to its western side. No doubt, this lake, which slept so tranquilly in the heart of the great enclosure was artificial in nature, resulting from huge, hidden water generators and huge, hidden heaters, since, almost no natural surface water or ice had ever been discovered on icy-cold Yoovellus.

Zan Fadron did not mention this probable artificial origin of the lake to Thovas Tho because Zan Fadron feared that Thovas Tho might instantly affirm that the suspected artificiality had been staged eons ago by Forerunner Gods for the express purpose of testing his—Thovas Tho's—faith in this day of grace. Furthermore, Zan Fadron knew if Thovas Tho said that, he would get angry and they would quarrel again.

The caravan promoter was just hefting the last pack to a tired shoulder when Solgat Sol, who was walking about the rim, admiring the view below, paused, bent over, and after a moment called Zan Fadron to come there, that he had found some more rope of the Vajiros. The caravan agent veered and approached the spot with his last bundle. He laid it down wearily, wriggled his shoulder in relief, and asked Solgat Sol where. The Horgadilian pointed to a bit of the stuff just protruding over the inner scarp of the precipice.

The caravan agent was afraid to walk down and look at it, but he lay down on his stomach, told Solgat Sol to hold his legs, and inched forward until his head protruded over the edge. The vast depth, the lean of the wall on which he was poised gave Zan Fadron a swift sickening feeling of lurching forward in a mile-long plunge. He shut his eyes tightly, and drew a shivery breath, but for a full half a minute he could still feel himself falling inward with the swing of the wall. Presently he saw nothing except the back of his closed eyelids. He opened them in a tiny crack. By eliminating the vastness of the abyss, he overcame his sense of falling given by the concave walls. So he lay and looked with nerves more or less steady. To his surprise, then to his amazement, he saw that a strand of the Vajiros' rope extended from the rim of the crater downward and inward for about a hundred and fifty feet and attached to one of the huge irregularities or folds in the stony circuit that gave the opposite side of the great palisades its peculiar sculptured appearance.

How the rope ever became connected between the two places, Zan Fadron could not imagine, because a plumb line would have missed the ledge below by a good fifty feet. Then he saw that the upper end of the rope, immediately under his eyes, was merely glued to the rocky face of the precipice. Zan Fadron could scarcely believe his senses. To attach a rope to anything by gluing... it was fantastic. Yet, brief reflection told him this would be the only method of anchoring a line on bare stone. He reached down gingerly, and pulled at the rope. It was tightly drawn from the glue-point and his pull did not budge the glue in the slightest. Indeed, it held with the same sort of firmness as does a wire rope anchored in a suspension bridge. While Zan Fadron was making these investigations, Solgat Sol drew him back by his legs. The promoter made no objections. In fact, he felt a sense of relief when good solid stone shut off the vertiginous depth beneath him.

Solgat Sol pulled him in and asked anxiously. "Are you well, Gentlesap?"

"Yes, why?"

The fellow seemed shaken.

"I... I was talking to you, Gentlevir, and you did not answer. Why, you are as white as a ghost. What did you see?"

"A rope."

"A rope! Blessed Void, is that all? Do you lie half an hour stretched out looking at rope!"

"Half an hour?" Zan Fadron stared at the Horgadilian, then realized, with a queer sensation, that he had fainted.

CHAPTER 9

Thovas Tho's second man-sized miracle, sent a certain thrill of conviction down Zan Fadron's spine. Against all probabilities, the colporteur had found a method of descent. It began really to look as if circumstance molded itself around the fellow's convenience. This upset the caravan agent in an odd manner.

Indeed, one may generalize and say that miracles are abhorrent to metropolitan Darkools at large. The inexplicable wears a sinister countenance. It is abhorrent because the average metropolitan Darkool is essentially a calculating creature, and a miracle connotes an incalculable power. Many bona fide religious rites are efforts to placate that power to regularity.

The sophistication of metropolitans who are Darkools, added a moral tinge to religion. That is to say, the average religious Darkool, living in a city, promises to exercise stability of character if he can rely upon a Deity to use the same self control. The relation thus becomes contractual and both parties are bound. By dint of setting a good example before Heaven, modern Darkool metropolitan clergymen have almost entirely suppressed the miraculous. They have regularized the pantheon... almost. Of course, among Darkools who are Outools, things are often exactly reversed. Many Outool tribes have degenerated into primitivism, a climate in which miracles abound and a belief in miracles flourishes.

At any rate the metropolitan Darkool clergymen have been so successful that a certain school of ools has sprung up who claim there never was and there never will be such a thing as a miracle. This, of course, is not only folly, it is ingratitude. They do not consider the trouble the sacerdotes have taken to suppress these aberrations; an aberration being a miracle, which if nothing would mean that the sacerdotes were suppressing nothing and therefore their efforts are not worthy of thanks.

These scientists claim to believe in law. Smite this type of scientist with a miracle and he clings with a sort of pathetic trust that it all happened through law; an unknown law, that would work ex post facto if ever discovered. This, surely, is mad-

ness. Laws are not allowed to work ex post facto; the written official constitution of the government of almost every darkoid is very clear on that point, especially when interpreted by one of the numerous uneducated Outools.

Such scientists are regarded by many Outools as a sect of Darkools exercising blind faith and willful disregard of the truth against all the canons of reason. Yet among such scientists can be found many lovable and childlike characters, adorable to such primitive Outools.

However, Zan Fadron was not a scientist. He had no such sustaining faith in a mythical law. He was a hardheaded business agent, a promoter, an opportunist, who seized on the passing face of circumstance and made the most of it. He acknowledged a miracle grudgingly when he saw one. And this was a miracle, this rope leading down into emptiness. In an effort at rational explanation, his brain attacked the problem with ratlike persistence. Even if the rope had been of the most ordinary human origin, the probability that the expedition would have stumbled upon it was remote. But for a beastrider in a zenoc rodeo to bring a lariat, glue it to the cliff and disappear, thus leaving Thovas Tho a mode of descent... . Zan Fadron stared around the vast burnt pass up which he had clambered; the enormous scars of the volcano became tinged with a nightmarish quality.

Thovas Tho, on the other hand, was not even curious about what his comrades were investigating. He accepted it as a matter of fact. He simply said to the Horgadilian: ''Praise the Forerunner Lords, Brothool Solgat Sol, you've found the way down.'' Then he walked to the edge and sized up the situation from a mechanical point of view and said: ''We'll have to tie loops on these bundles and slide 'em down. I can't climb back for every pack.''

Solgat Sol and Thovas Tho cut up the harness of the dead grimposauri to make traveling loops for the packs. Zan Fadron sat and smoked and tried to Euclidize the problem before him. The man who killed their grimposauri escaped by means of this rope. He did not use a flying-machine. The theory of a wonderfully advanced civilization was probably false. The assailant probably came up out of the abyss with his beast, killed the grimposauri and retreated back into it. With his riding-beast? Dragging a dead grimposaurus to the abyss? What for? Was grimposaurus an article of diet down there?

The caravan agent flung away his cigar. He was getting nowhere.

At this moment Solgat Sol looked up from his work on the loops. ''I don't see how Gentlevir Zan Fadron will climb down if the precipice gives him the vertigo.''

Mere thought of such a climb threw the promoter into a sort of panic. He began casting about for objections.

''How'll we get out after we get in?''

''Ride out, Gentlehomo, just as the man did who killed our grimposauri.''

"Ride up this precipice?"

"Gentlevir, you know the ool did not ride out up this cliff. He came out by some trail to attack us, and slid down the rope quickly because I was firing at him."

This was a more nearly reasonable explanation than Zan Fadron's own.

"How did he know we were just here?"

"No doubt he saw our campfire last night."

Zan Fadron thought up another objection. "I'm afraid that rope won't hold us. It's merely glued to the stone. That's all; a little pat of glue."

"You know, Brothool Zan Fadron, it's bound to hold one ool up, if it will lower a beastrider and his riding-beast."

"But look here, Thovas Tho, how under high heaven could an ool and a beast get down that rope?"

"Just leave that mystery to the Forerunner Gods, Brothool Zan Fadron, and accept Their blessings... ."

"Confound it, we're leaving too many mysteries! This thing's getting on my nerves."

He stood staring into the emptiness of the crater, and presently added: "No man on darkoid could lower a grimposaurus a hundred and fifty feet without a derrick, unless that man knew how to operate our antigrav saddles."

"But, Gentlevir, we watched him do it. Whew! If I live to get back to Lapis Lazuli, it will be a proud day when I can say that I, Solgat Sol, saw the King of the Vajiros pick up his riding beast by the horn of the saddle and lower it a hundred and fifty feet into a volcano."

Zan Fadron walked over and ventured to lie down on his stomach and peep over the ledge again. Once more the height made him feel squeamish, but he held his eyes resolutely to their task. To lower a grimposaur to the ledge beneath him, even a derrick would have failed. It would have been necessary to swing the animal inward about fifty feet, land it with precision on a ledge too narrow for a grimposaurus' footing.

And after that, what went with the grimposaurus?

Nobody went down into the abyss with a grimposaurus. Yet something had attacked their camp and had escaped down this rope. It had appeared to be a man on beast-back. It had used a lariat. If not a human being, then some zenoc, some monster, some devil, some centaur spawned in the Sedna Mountains came up with ropes, with a swift and inscrutable method of inflicting death. His head ached with this endless, futile reasoning that went in circles and got nowhere.

The caravan agent lay on his belly and stared around at the encircling cliffs. They slept in the twinkling starlight like some vast amphitheater awaiting the first

movement of its tragic games. Solgat Sol also appeared to be thinking hard. He tied the loops with a preoccupied air and sat with head tilted to one side, so the smoke of his cigarette would not trail up into his eye, long after the fire had gone out. With the tying of the last loop, he threw away the stub, arose and cleared his throat a trifle self-consciously. "Well, Gentlehomoes, my grimposauri are dead."

Both of the other two Darkool looked up at this unnecessary announcement.

"Yes, Brothool Solgat Sol?" interrogated Thovas Tho.

"So, I suppose, since my grimposauri are dead why... ." He spread his hands and drew down his lips, Horgadilian fashion. "I suppose you have no further use for me."

Zan Fadron was discomfited: "Sure we will! We want you to go along. We can easily arrange a new salary basis."

"The harvest is white, Brothool Solgat Sol, but the laborers are few."

The Horgadilian did not look at his protesting friends, but brushed at a speck on his greasy green velvet jacket. "I am a muleteer, Gentlevir, Thovas Tho, not a priest."

"But look here," put in Zan Fadron, "we need a cook."

"Nor a cook."

"Then somebody to help with the packs."

"I am a muleteer, Gentlesap Zan Fadron, not a grimposaurus."

"You are not going to turn back on us, Brothool Solgat Sol?"

"Well, yes, Gentlehomo Thovas Tho." And after a moment's hesitation: "It does no good to give away the little books."

"That rests with the Forerunner Gods, Brothool Solgat Sol."

"Of course, certainly." There came a pause. Solgat Sol stood frowning at the deserted tent and the dead grimposauri. "There is no way to carry on the books, Gentlevir Thovas Tho, without the grimposauri."

"We'll find more grimposauri ahead, Forerunner Gods willing, Brothool Solgat Sol. If we don't, I'll carry them pack by pack a hundred yards at a time until I have spread the blessed Word clear into Roozlib."

Solgat Sol nodded solemnly. "Yes, yes, I have heard of saints, Gentlevir Thovas Tho. The priests have told me of the blessed saints, but I am a muleteer."

"So you will turn back, Brothool Solgat Sol?"

"My grimposauri are dead, Gentlesap Thovas Tho."

The colporteur stood looking at the Horgadilian with an expressionless face. "May the grace of the Forerunner Gods go with you, Brothool Solgat Sol, and may They keep watch over you! Now I'm going down, and I'll ask you to shoot down my packs, one by one, so I can get them off without tearing them."

"Yes, Gentlevir, with all my heart!" Solgat Sol was evidently ashamed of himself, but when the muleteer cut himself off from the expedition, it occurred to Zan Fadron this was really the most sensible thing to do. The promoter was surprised he had not thought of it himself. So assuming a diplomatic manner he began: "Look here, Thovas Tho, Solgat Sol hasn't a bad idea. Why shouldn't all of us go back to Oejub, fit out more grimposauri and find a better route through the mountains?"

"He that putteth his hand to the plow and turneth back, Brothool Zan Fadron... ."

"Aw, here now," the caravan agent was annoyed at once at this religious quotation, "there's got to be some reason to this thing. We can go back, start over... ."

"Brothool Zan Fadron, do you suppose I'd let my Forerunner Lords and Masters stretch a miraculous rope down this bottomless pit for me, and then refuse to go down it? Ain't that a sign my work's down there?"

The caravan promoter made a gesture of protest. "Our grimposauri are dead."

"They slew our grimpos to try our faith, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"A man in my business," said the promoter dryly, "doesn't work by faith; he goes after what's in sight."

The colporteur considered him. "Does that mean you are deserting the Forerunner God's cause, too, Brothool Zan Fadron?"

The word "deserting" annoyed the Darkool caravan agent. It seemed ill-chosen and unnecessarily harsh.

"I don't think it wise to go on."

"The wisdom of men is foolishness with the Forerunner Gods, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"I don't mind saying your plan looks like bally foolishness to me; relaying a lot of Catechisms into Roozlib... it's mad!"

The colporteur's hard-molded face betrayed neither pique nor regret. Zan Fadron felt uncomfortable under the stare of his wide-open black eyes. After a moment he arose, walked over to his clothes pack and got out a package of letters. "Let us part friends, Brothool Zan Fadron," he said in his perpetual even-tempered drawl. "If we part now, I don't believe we'll ever see each other again on this darkoid, but I hope I'll meet you in... ."

"Yes, yes," interposed the promoter uncomfortably.

"I hope you don't mind taking these letters back to Lapis Lazuli, and posting them to Ludia Faba." He handed over the packs. "Let's see, the postage will be twenty-four singularities." He reached into his pocket and drew out a greasy purse and started to count the exact change.

The caravan agent made an annoyed gesture. "For pity's sake, Thovas Tho, put up your money! I swear, you have the least sense of proportion; I don't want

you to pay me twenty-four singularities!''

Thovas Tho handed over the bundle without further words. The letters evidently had been written at different times. The top one bore the address in almost illegible pencil writing:

''GENTLEFEM LUDIA FABA (SAVED AND SANCTIFIED).

THOVAS THO MINE.

DARKOID FLIGSID.''

Thovas Tho shook hands with the two ools in a wooden way. Then he asked Solgat Sol to hold his feet and lower him until he could reach down and catch the rope below the glue. The caravan agent watched the feat. Notwithstanding all the strange things that had come up on this journey, the lowering of Thovas Tho over the cliff was one of the most fantastic. The colporteur was short and had to be lowered a long way. The two ools worked with the nonchalance of steeple jacks. The saddle-colored Horgadilian inched him farther and farther over the brink. Thovas Tho's head, shoulders, then his whole torso sank out of sight. By this time Solgat Sol was braced heavily to prevent his ool from plunging a mile straight down.

''A leetle furder, Brothool Solgat Sol,'' drawled the colporteur.

''An inch more, Gentlesap,'' squeezed out the Horgadilian in a strained voice, ''and you'll pull loose!''

''An inch more, Brothool Solgat Sol. The Forerunner Gods'll strengthen yore grip.''

Zan Fadron stared as the straining muleteer gave another inch. Sweat stood out on his face. Prickling sensations went up and down Zan Fadron's back. He wondered if the glue would hold.

''All right, Brothool Solgat Sol,'' came the drawl. Next moment Thovas Tho vanished head foremost over the ledge. As he went out of sight, the question formed in Zan Fadron's mind. How was it possible for that other ool, the slayer of the grimposauri, to reach the rope in black darkness, in a moment's time, if it required such exertions from two such athletes? It would require monkeyish activity. Monkeyish — a new possibility flickered before Zan Fadron. Was the crater a land of great anthropoid apes; an ape on beast-back—an ape that could make these strange lariats—an ape bred by a zenoc warlord? Every explanation that Zan Fadron could conjure up held a delirious quality. The breath of the icy cold fields high overhead breathed down on the brooding ool. He shivered.

When the Catechism packs had been shot down to the Fligsidian, Solgat Sol and Zan Fadron remained on the cliff, their labors at colporteurage come to an end. Neither of them peered over the cliff at the tiny ant-like figure toiling at the bundles far below them. But although he refused to look, Zan Fadron saw the little orange-striped man distinctly.

The oools on the cliff avoided each other's eyes. Solgat Sol rolled himself a shuck cigarette, then sat tapping and tapping it on his thumb nail. Zan Fadron drew out his squarp-skin case, and his fingers automatically went through the performance of choosing and applying a cigar to his lips, and lighting it with his oxygen-generating cigarette lighter. High overhead, about two-thirds of the height of the mountains, circled three or four black specks inspecting the motionless forms of the grimposauri, and the equally motionless men.

The flavor of Zan Fadron's cigar reminded him of Thovas Tho's remark in Tamen Kun Park that the Forerunner Gods did not like the odor of tobacco, that They preferred lilac, because Thovas Tho and Ludia Faba had been married under a lilac bush at Thovas Tho Mine, Darkoid, Fligsid. How anthropomorphic are the Forerunner Gods!

The promoter visioned that marriage: The circuit rider in rustic black; the bride and groom with rustic finery concealing their vital bodies, while above and behind them glowed the lilac. A certain sense of futility, of emptiness, that comes at times to all unwed men, fell over the promoter. Here he was, twenty-five, sitting on this vast infernal lava drift, and there was not an ool in the darkoid to whom he could send letters, if he meditated plunging to destruction, except his resignation to Pul Uxtar. Perhaps he ought to have married one of the ditzoid sexpots in his office. He was soft, with a core-reaching softness that comes of four years at paperwork. He was so soft that he was allowing a fanatical colporteur to scramble down alone into an extinct volcano, along sinister ropes, toward a murderous agency that inflicted death in the most mysterious manner, that dragged dead grimposauri and vanished down enormous cliffs at midnight — and this colporteur was a kind of friend— so this was the knight errant, the adventurer, who, four long years ago had entered the Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. offices seeking romance! This deserter! He glanced at the horizon and saw the twin peaks that had so mesmerized him the night before. He thought of his recurring dream that the girl he loved was imprisoned in a canyon in the outback, desperately awaiting rescue. Could the canyon of his dreams actually be a volcanic crater, instead? Could it be this very one? A violent sense of urgency and fidelity swept him.

Zan Fadron tossed away his cigar and arose. "Solgat Sol," he said briskly. "I think I've made a business mistake. I've really got to go down," He flipped his thumb toward the chasm, "after all. Pure business with me." The promoter hesitated. The saddle-colored green jacket sat appraising him. After a moment Zan Fadron went on: "I'm going to tell you why I came out here. I'm looking for locations to open supply depots for airships,"

Solgat Sol nodded casually. "Airships... ."

"Yes, did you think I was a muleteer?" questioned Zan Fadron.

"No, absolutely not... I wondered... ."

"Well, that's it, and it just struck me that this crater would make a wonderful hangar and tourist depot. No heavy winds can strike a ship down there. The place is large enough to maneuver in. It is one of the most magnificent scenes to be found on this darkoid."

Solgat Sol nodded soberly: "Yes, Gentlehomo, I have been thinking about Gentlehomo Thovas Tho, too. I am like you, Gentlehomo; never before did Solgat Sol desert his friend for a man, woman, zenoc, or devil."

The promoter was faintly piqued when he saw the Horgadilian placed no credence in his account of the aviation project. However that was of no moment; Zan Fadron set about getting certain belongings of his down the rope; then he would rejoin his fellow adventurer. He shouted this news down to Thovas Tho. From far below he heard an indistinct: "Praise the Forerunner Lords!"

Solgat Sol contrived a sort of ship's ladder made out of a harness to get the caravan agent over the lip of the precipice to the rope. Then the Horgadilian put loops around Zan Fadron's chest and knees and looped him to the line as if he had been another bundle. He fixed leather guards for Zan Fadron's hands and showed him how to hold the rope. Zan Fadron backed down to the ladder, and by looking carefully at the pat of glue, kept his head.

Then he loosed the little companionway, and the glue and cliff rushed upward pulling a long silky rope through his hands. It seemed to Zan Fadron he was descending with the speed of a free fall. The little edge sprung at him and struck him a jarring blow. He sat there, tied to his rope, jolted and somewhat stunned until Thovas Tho loosed him. Solgat Sol sailed down as gracefully as a swallow. He held the rope with his legs and one hand while he waved his hat with the other. Thovas Tho took occasion to speak a word of warning about "the filthy vanity of the flesh."

For some queer reason this stricture rather pleased both the friends. They were warm from the glow of self-sacrifice. Thovas Tho had cached all his Catechisms except one pack. Now he chose two more packs, a little one for Zan Fadron. The caching was simple, a mere piling of the books into one of the numerous small caves of this vast entablature that ringed a twenty-mile circumference. There was no danger to the Catechisms from objects falling from atop the entablature because of the overhang. Zan Fadron hefted his pack, got it on his shoulder and moved tentatively down the ledge he had seen from the rim.

It was considerably wider than he had thought, and it caused him to renew his speculation concerning the possibility of landing a grimposaurus in such a place. It did not seem to be a road down after all. Zan Fadron was forced to walk with his pack of Catechisms on his outer shoulder, and to hold on to the cusps, or air pockets, in the outsweep of lava above his head. The ledge dwindled to a shelf, and after forty or fifty yards, the shelf became a mere wrinkle in the face of the mile-high wall.

It occurred to Zan Fadron, as he inched along, that this little fold could very well slant back up the wall, or turn straight down, or tail out to nothing in the vast concavity. He had assumed, since a rope led to it, that it was a path down. But as the way grew less and less practicable, he realized that he was down there, and he could never reclimb that hundred and fifty feet of rope and regain the rim.

His fingers grew tired of clinging to the abrasive lava, and they became sore. If the thing that attacked the camp were a monkey, how could three men with packs hope to duplicate its simian descent? A kind of amazement grew in Zan Fadron that he had followed Thovas Tho so rashly. On the heels of his amazement followed the repentance of a man who has committed a generous, impulsive act. There is a cliche current in moralistic circles that no one ever regrets an unselfish act. In reality few deeds bring more bitter penitence. When a man acts selfishly and loses, he has the consolation of knowing he did the best he could for himself.

It was a mistake of the head, not of the heart. But when he acts charitably, he is nearly always motivated by some unaccustomed impulse that springs abruptly into action, moves him to some rash goodness, then cooling, leaves its victim to meditation and remorse. So Zan Fadron crept along, abusing himself for having wandered into this vertical cul de sac, for marooning himself on the face of a gigantic cliff. Thovas Tho on the other hand footed the wrinkle with entire self-confidence, and even that displeased Zan Fadron. Why had he followed such a goatish fellow? So profound was his disgust it actually tickled his pneumogastric nerve into the first faint fluttering of nausea.

Around a turn in the precipice, sure enough the unevenness they followed smoothed out, but at its end, another silken rope dropped to a threadlike walkway sixty or seventy feet below. It became evident, after all, they were following a hazardous, but defined trail down this mile of concavity. The two men passed their packs to Thovas Tho, who shot them down. Then the colporteur went. Solgat Sol strapped on Zan Fadron's loops, and the promoter followed the missionary. After them came Solgat Sol with a flourish.

Along this crease Zan Fadron was forced to lift his inner foot high and bend his knee outward before it had room to pass between his outer leg and the cliff. His Catechism pack raked the wall and pressed him gently outward.

The caravan agent kept his eyes rigidly on his footing; its ups and downs, and inequalities. He tried to receive no impression of the landscape far below him. But he could not avoid sensing the illumination of his situation. The cliff that swung out over his head shut off all starlight which would have made low-beams nearly worthless if it weren't for the fact that a strong greenish reflection beat up from the landscape below on the under side of the cliff. It poured up through his legs. He could see it shining under the brim of his hat. With his night-vision, retinal implant's low-beams on, no matter how rigidly he avoided seeing the landscape, that up-

beating brilliance registered the enormousness of his height in every nerve of his body. He could feel the chasm in the calves of his legs, along the inner sides of his arms, in his diaphragm. He could imagine himself falling, falling interminably down the abyss of Hopeless-greenish light. His head felt queer.

He was not sure whether his fingers had found a cusp and were holding to the cliff. It came to him as a sort of discovery that he had stopped climbing and was standing unsteadily clinging to something. His hands and feet seemed detached, and a long way from him. Then he heard Solgat Sol and Thovas Tho shouting from vast distances. Thovas Tho's voice said: "Take his pack, Brothool Solgat Sol and lean him right forward on mine. Lemme run my right arm through that loop. All right, careful now. If anything happens to us, Brothool Sol, I hope I'll meet you up yonder where they ain't no more sorrow nor troub... ."

Syncopy produces no perceptible hiatus in the flow of consciousness, merely a jump, a dislocation, a picking up of ordered impressions out of nowhere. When Zan Fadron regained his senses, he discovered first that the temperature had greatly increased. When he gained a little more concentration, he saw he was far down the side of the cliff, and the flat green at the bottom of the crater had resolved itself into the crests of Hopeless trees with cultivated Hopeless plots up near the northern half of the circle. The lake near the center of the vast amphitheater was of considerable size and lay beneath him, as blue as sapphire.

Thovas Tho arose from where he sat and was about to pick the promoter up again when he saw Zan Fadron's eyes were open. "Are you all right?" he asked cordially.

The caravan agent was thoroughly ashamed. He got himself weakly together. "This is a hell of a stroke I pulled," he said in a sick man's aspirate.

"You'll be okay pretty soon. Not so high here."

"Don't see how you ever got me down."

"I never could have, Brothool Zan Fadron, if the Forerunner Lords hadn't strengthened my arm, bless Their holy name!"

Zan Fadron looked up. He had evidently been shot down a tremendously long silken rope that had landed him here. He was now at the top of the detritus that had fallen from the overhang and the going from there down was rough but not dangerous. He picked himself up presently and started shakily down through the huge boulders.

The three men disturbed a zenoc winged creature, about the size of a large eagle, nesting among the stones. The great creature launched itself into space with a whistling of feathers and flapped with slow strokes through the diamond-like starshine toward the Hopeless forest below. A few hundred feet down, they observed two young vicunas playing among the cliffs. Later, they stopped at a spring set with Hopeless ferns. Zan Fadron believed it to be an artificial spring

produced by a large buried water generator and underground heating system. They tested the water with a scanner; it was potable, and they drank.

They were just climbing down into a subtropical country, artificially created with, among other things, zenoc Hopeless technology. After the bleak Sedna Mountain scenery this kindliness of pseudonature was as grateful as starshine to lowbeamers.

Zan Fadron's spirits began to revive. The commercial possibilities of the situation impressed him. Here, in a darkoid setting, were the temperature, the verdure, and the glamour of the famous pleasure resorts of the Quelsian Riviera on the planet Quels. Almost involuntarily he began projecting a tourist folder describing the place. He could see a clump of Hopeless royal palms on the southern edge of the lake that would make a good holo.

On the front of his folder he would have a holo in color showing the great reddish height of the volcano's wall with mountain peaks towering above its rim. The beauty and vastness of his surroundings went through his nerves like a cold wind, and yet at the same time he continued thinking of his planned tourist brochure. He thought of it just as an artist thinks of pictures when looking upon magnificence.

It was his profession. He would call it: "See the Quelsian Riviera In The Sedna Mountain Range Of The Darkoid Yoovellus."

Zan Fadron surveyed the scene with a sort of exaltation. Out near that lake he would construct an enormous tourist hotel. There would be sailing and fishing on its waters. Golf links would ring its blue expanse. A hovercar would follow the sixty-mile circuit of the cliffs.

Solgat Sol was muttering to himself. Yet, Zan Fadron heard a little of what he was muttering about. Solgat Sol had cursed the inventor of the antigrav saddle worn by his dead grimposauri.

"Why was the inventor at fault for any of this?" asked Zan Fadron, curious about the matter.

"Had it not been for the inventor's built-in fail-safes, Gentlevir," answered Solgat Sol, "we could have those saddles with us here now. They could lift us back out of here when we need to leave."

"Well, I happen to know something about those saddles, since Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. were importing them. The inventor installed those safeguards, which prevent the saddle from working if the grimposaurus were dead or if the saddle were taken off the grimposaurus; so as to protect children and errant adults from using too much antigrav, rising too high, and escaping a world's gravity field. Without rocket thrusters, they would be lost in the void."

"But Gentlesap," insisted Solgat Sol, "the inventor could have installed overrides for this type of emergency. The inventor was treating us wise muleteers as

all children and errant adults.''

By that time they were approaching the starshine that lay beyond the shadow of the overhang. Thovas Tho and Zan Fadron were abreast with Solgat Sol a little distance ahead. Thovas Tho walked so sturdily and was so much shorter than Zan Fadron that the promoter felt a return of shame that he had forced this little man to carry him down the cliff.

''How far did you pack me, Thovas Tho?'' he asked after a moment.

''Not far, Brothool Zan Fadron. From about right up there'' — he pointed at a distant indeterminate spot in the towering cliffs — ''to about there'' — the top of the detritus.

The promoter stared up and shivered.

Thovas Tho noted Zan Fadron's lack of rigor and proceeded in his nasal drawl: ''Why don't you make ready to meet your Forerunner Gods, Brothool Zan Fadron? You're a sinner and you know it.''

Zan Fadron looked around impatiently at the question.

Thovas Tho continued: ''The only sure thing in life is death, Brothool Zan Fadron. All of us has got to die. Your time may come before morning; hadn't you better get ready to meet your Makers?''

It annoyed Zan Fadron to have Thovas Tho talking of death. Death, whose black robes he had brushed half an hour ago, had again withdrawn itself to a respectful distance. In his heart, Zan Fadron felt that death would show a certain consideration for the worth and consequence of Gentlevir Zan Fadron. Death would come at the end of a long and useful life. It was crude of Thovas Tho to bring up such a remote unpleasantness. So he changed the subject by asking: ''What is that droning sound, bees?''

Thovas Tho listened. ''It sounds like Ludia Faba running her housecleaning robot.''

They were rounding a huge fallen boulder. Solgat Sol, who was in front, came to a stop just beyond the obstruction. With a gesture he drew the attention of his comrades. About fifty feet down the slope, among a scarlet grouping of Hopeless poinsettias stood a vast red man. His back was to the trio. His huge ton of a body had the humpbacked look characteristic of the exceedingly obese. He had no neck. A great head fitted down into an expanse of shoulders. His straight black hair was done up into a sort of knot on top of his head, and was decorated with a blue zenoc-winged-beast feather. At first glance he seemed to wear no clothes, but as he made certain bending movements in his work, a breech clout became visible among the rolls of flesh about his hips and buttocks. The invisible clout, quipapalm sandals and the feather formed his raiment.

He sweated prodigiously. Drops of sweat trickled down his brown bulk as if he stood under an invisible fountain. Under low-beam in this starshine, these trick-

ling drops gave him the appearance of being sequined with moving jewels. When he bent his arms, his elbows were but the gentlest of curves. The colossus was engaged in an operation as delicate as he was gross. He was tying or rather sticking, a long glistening cord from one flaming poinsettia to another. He had quite a network. Among the flowers droned dozens of humming birds. They made a blur of color moving about among the scarlet racemes.

While the men stared, one of these living jewels settled on a cord to rest. It stuck. The fat man waddled to it and picked off the little captive before it had time to gum its wings. He bit off its head. Then he pressed in his abdomen with a grunt, stooped and laid the beheaded bird in a basket. The basket glowed with other humming birds. It was half full. Its brilliance was greater than that of jewels. As the mammoth straightened, he caught a side glimpse of his audience. He came to a stand, took four paddling steps to turn his bulk and face his observers.

The eyes that regarded Zan Fadron were shining black slits in a rolling expanse. His jowls spread out over his chest. Yet with it all there was a poise, a dignity about the naked red man as ponderous as his corpus.

Solgat Sol removed his hat and began testing his languages and dialects. He finally found one that the ool understood: "Gentlehomo, you see before you three almsmen of the Forerunner Gods, not priests but honest thieves who come begging you to receive a little book of miraculous virtues. This holy book is good for aches, wounds, sores, scalds, boils, ulcers, carbuncles, the dengue, marasmus, and the calentures. A tea made from its leaves removes the discomforts of pregnant women. Balky grimposauri have been known to labor willingly when the dust off this sacred volume was blown into their ears. A broken water generator was miraculously repaired by... ."

There was much more to Solgat Sol's oration and the vast man heard it to the end with a mountainlike patience. When the Horgadilian came to a definite stop, the behemoth disregarded it all with a completeness that was droll and turned to Zan Fadron.

"Where did you ools come from?" he asked in a queer sort of one of the Outoolian dialects that Zan Fadron had mastered.

"From over the rim, Gentlevir," Zan Fadron made an upward gesture.

The colossus nodded: "An ool came over the rim once before, Gentlehomo; no doubt he was a kinsman of yours."

Zan Fadron was amazed at this deduction and was about to answer when the giant proceeded in his purring baritone: "He was pale, like you, a kinsman, no doubt." Again Zan Fadron started to demur, but the purr wandered on: "No doubt he was your kinsman, and you are now searching for your kinspeople here in Botomatl. I am sorry to say, Gentlehomo, you will find few of your kinspeople left. There is only your kinsman's great grandson, a great granddaughter; your eighth

cousin; his third nephew once crossed, your seventh cousin twice removed; his great niece, Prymoxl, who, poor woman is now heavy and sad with her sixteenth child, and there is Prymoxl's daughter, Tilita, your seventh prima. If you will follow me, I will show them all to you and allow you to hold long conversations with your kinsfolk. Just follow me.'' Here the vast man lifted his voice and called, ''Quiz-Quiz!''

A little hunchbacked Outool came out of a tangle of flowers, where he had evidently been asleep. ''Bring my basket.'' Then, with a sort of elephantine courtesy he motioned the men to follow him and moved off through the Hopeless poinsettias into a park of Hopeless tropical trees of different varieties.

This deluge of genealogy left Zan Fadron entirely at a loss. It was too detailed for a sweeping denial. Then a thought crossed his mind that perhaps there was some covert reason why he would do well to enter this strange place as a kinsman. If they were the Vajiros, being kin might save him from being cooked. He could make nothing at all of it. Finally, he said tentatively, over the dripping red shoulder, as a sort of straw to test the wind: ''I'm afraid I shan't have time to see so many kinsmen. Tomorrow, I go on west into Roozlib.''

The behemoth honored this communication by stopping dead still, making six rotating shuffles and facing the Darkool caravan agent. ''Go west?''

''Yes, Gentlevir.''

''Out of Botomatl?''

''Into Roozlib, Gentlesap.''

The colossus stood staring at Zan Fadron out of an impassive face. After several moments he said: ''You are indeed a kinsman of that ancient man who came into Botomatl one hundred and ninety seven years ago. He too, desired to get out of Botomatl. I have his whole story knotted into a quippus by my great grandfather, Gogoma, whose name I have the honor to bear.'' Here he made a slight bulbous bow. ''My great grandfather gave your great grandfather thirty-three strands from the center of the Web of the Stars in order that your great grandfather might lime zenoc eagleoid and fly out of Botomatl. Your great grandfather limed zenoc eagleoid for five years. He was a joyful man during those years, so says the quippus, and when he captured a zenoc eagleoid, he would come to my great grandfather and say. 'Holy Gogoma, I am a happy mortal. I am another eagleoid nearer home.'

''In five years he caught twelve. Then he bade my grandfather adieu, took his eagleoid up to a high cliff and leaped off. But the eagleoid struggled in different directions, and your grandfather fell and was dashed to pieces. That is why he never returned to his people, and why you are here.''

During this grotesque recital, the modern Gogoma panted heavily, forging ahead, sweating profusely. Whether the whole anecdote were concocted for the occasion or not, Zan Fadron did not know, but it expressed an alarming state of

fact — or fiction.

"Do you mean, Gentlevir," he asked blankly, "that there is no way out of Botomatl?"

"There has not been, Gentlehomo," purred the fat man casually, "since the priests carved the temple of the Stars. How warm it is today."

CHAPTER 10

It required ten, perhaps twelve, minutes for Gogoma's information that no man had ever escaped from Botomatl really to register on Zan Fadron. A sort of shocked questioning formed in the caravan promoter's mind. He felt he had not heard distinctly. "No man has ever got out?"

"Your kinsman failed, Gentlehomo."

"And no one else tried?"

"No one."

Zan Fadron stared at the head set down in the immense shoulders. The promoter drew in a breath to ask if there were any way to communicate with his offices in Lapis Lazuli. The query was too idle. He let the air out softly. The ponderous red man waddled on into a grove of immense Hopeless trees. It was really a Hopeless jungle partially cleared of Hopeless undergrowth. In some places were parklike clearances canopied with leaves and hung with Hopeless lianas which climbed and twined, fulfilling their souls as vines. These open spaces were columned by those huge and grotesque boles into which some Hopeless trees contort when forced by the perpetual stimulus of the light of twinkling stars and the internal light of lumoplasts.

Here a Hopeless paddlewood tree flung out radial buttresses twenty or thirty feet from the huge core of the tree. There a kind of Hopeless palm piled up a series of swollen nodules. A Hopeless banyan tree drove a hundred piles into the ground; a Hopeless cielba tree flung out a hollow circle of wood that preempted the space of a Lapis Lazuli lot. The wonderful smell of fresh chlorophyll, wood, plants, flowers, and greenness filled the air. Birds and zenoc winged beasts shrieked and called.

For about an hour the great fleshy blob of an ool led the way among the foot paths and at last paused before a huge tree so much like a Hopeless baobab tree that Zan Fadron believed it to be one. The Hopeless vegetation about the tree was worn smooth, and a kind of mud oven stood to one side. Red peppers and some big drying calabashes were hung up on the outside.

The place smelled of garlic. A fairly large hole, squared into a door by human labor led into the hollow trunk. Gogoma drummed on this entrance and waited. Came a shuffling from the interior and a moment later a baggy old woman ap-

peared in the opening. Gogoma made a gesture of salutation; the fat of his arm swayed and dripped.

"A kinsman of yours, Prymoxl. He has come to enquire about your grandfather, who was his great grandfather."

"A kinsman —" She looked at Zan Fadron out of rather fine old eyes set in a sadly withered face.

"A cousin of yours, your primo."

"How did he get here?"

"Over the cliff, as your grandfather came, Prymoxl, and he already speaks of going back as your grandfather spoke. You can talk to him yourself. I commend him to your care."

The woman approached Zan Fadron curiously, and when she came quite close, he saw, after all, she was not aged in years, but she had degenerated greatly in advance of her chronological years. She had the withered sagginess of women whom the tropics has forced into intense fruition, and swifter caducity. Indeed, in her decay, she retained traces of her fugitive blossoming.

Her eyes were finely set; her ears maintained their delicacy of design; her hair was more finely spun than that of most other Outools. All this, no doubt, harked back to that ancestor who dropped by a miracle into Botomatl a hundred and ninety-seven years ago, and today gave Zan Fadron a spurious claim to her kinship.

The old woman shrugged as Zan Fadron appraised her shapelessness.

"I am afraid, Gentlehomo, you will find little of your blood in my veins."

"Kinship lies in the heart, Gentlefem," flattered the agent of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd.

It pleased her. "I am a non-Outool here."

She tapped her withered breast. "Do you see in me the sister you seek, primo (cousin)?" There was a kind of raillery in her cackle.

"I only hope I am not disappointing, Gentlefem."

The odd crone quacked in laughter, came closer with that familiarity a sense of kinship lends, seized his arm and drew it about her waist.

"Behold us, Gogoma," she paraded in ironic gaiety, "Brother and sister from a line of brave men and beautiful Gentlefems!"

She shook with laughter at her own satire, and the caravan agent perceived with surprise that his shapeless companion was again about to become a mother.

"The Forerunner Lords giveth and They taketh away, Sistool Prymoxl," quoted Thovas Tho with comforting intent.

The old baggage ceased laughing abruptly at this kindly meant apology for her ugliness.

"Primo, your criado (servant) is insolent."

Gogoma smoothed her temper over with a massive gesture. "I begged you to preserve your wonderful beauty, Prymoxl, just as I ask you to preserve Tilita's loveliness. She is as much like her beautiful grandmother as two tamarinds... ." He wagged his fat jowls and said in a different key: "What I came for, Gentlefem, was to show you your kinsman. I have them a sleeping place, and you can send their fare."

The crone turned with the duty of a kinswoman in her manner. "Surely, Gentlevirs, my daughter Tilita will bring your supper."

Zan Fadron began the usual protest; Prymoxl smothered it with the usual generosity. It was no trouble. The pot was boiling. Tilita would be curious to see her fair, tall kinsman. She would need some excuse for coming to see the Gentlevirs. She was a pretty child, quite a woman.

"How many children have you, Gentlefem?"

She cast up her fine black eyes at the leaves and fell into a calculation. After some computing and silent nods of the head, she said, "This will be my sixteenth, Gentlevir."

Zan Fadron did a little problem of his own. She had been married sixteen years. So she was thirty or thirty-one years old, this ancient creature, while he, Zan Fadron, her youthful kinsboy, was twenty-five.

There was something grotesque about it. To say something he asked: "Do they all live with you, Gentlefem?"

"Only one is here in Botomatl, primo."

The agent dropped his small talk and became alert. "Where do the others live?"

"My others, my fourteen..." The hag glanced at Gogoma, then raised her eyes to the glitter of the stars high up above the baobab top. "Why my fourteen little ones are among the stars, primo."

"Among the stars," repeated Zan Fadron blankly.

"Yes, primo, my fourteen babies are among the stars."

This queer statement left the promoter out of the small change of conversation. He couldn't get his mind back to trifles. Gogoma told the hag where he meant to bed his guests, and the four men presently made their adieus.

The place Gogoma had in mind proved to be a Hopeless paddlewood tree not far from Prymoxl's abode. Its radial buttresses looked like a dark cone spread under a cloud of verdure. Nearer they saw that thin partitions divided the space around the trunk into eight triangular cubicles. Gogoma evidently had passed word by the hunchback of the newcomers' arrival, for these cubicles were already furnished. Mats of yellow nipa cloth were over the earthen floors. Jars carved

out of the porous lava sat full of water, and a slow transpiration kept the liquid chilled. Hammocks swung across the acute interior angles of the triangles.

Overhead, on top of the thin buttresses, stretched another roll of matting that could be loosed by pulling a string and would roll down and form a roof. Even a jar of flowers, on a little table, garnished each of these open-air apartments. The whole ensemble held an Outoolian simplicity and charm. Gogoma introduced his guests to their compartments with much polite quivering on his part and many protests of satisfaction on theirs, and presently took himself off, looking like nothing so much as a huge jelly man that had spewed out of the taproot of some tree in this fantastic Hopeless forest.

The caravan agent chose the cubicle on the western side of the tree for its special charm. Thovas Tho and Solgat Sol piled their Catechism packs in the colporteur's cubicle which lay toward the south. As Zan Fadron made his little housekeeping arrangements, he could hear his companions talking through the thin partitions. They were discussing whether Gogoma was the man who had killed their grimposauri. The Horgadilian thought he was, and that he had said there was no way out of the crater in order to prove an alibi. Thovas Tho thought that Gogoma may have been miraculously translated to the rim to slay the grimposauri in order to bring down the blessings of the Forerunner Gospel on Botomatl. Solgat Sol cleared his throat at this. Thovas Tho enquired rather sharply if he doubted that the Forerunner Gods could perform this miracle.

"No doubt They could," agreed the Horgadilian after a pause, "but it is easier for me to believe the old yellow bag's a liar. You see, Gentlehomo Thovas Tho," he added apologetically, "I've seen so many more yellow liars than I have miracles."

"Then how did Gogoma get down that cliff right under our eyes, with his riding beast too?"

This rather empty discussion was interrupted by a girl coming through the Hopeless forest with a platter balanced on her head. It sat on her polished black hair without assistance from her hands, which were engaged with two jars. The thing most observable from a distance was the grace of her carriage, and a tight-fitting bodice of such luminous green that it seemed it must originate its own brilliance, surely due to lumoplasts.

Closer, the caravan agent saw that her face was of the vivid type, a sallow paleness against jet black hair. Her cheek bones were rather high, and her lips were scarlet. Her eyes were as black as her jacket was luminous. A deep shyness melded with a wonderful innocence and radiated from her. Zan Fadron rose from his hammock, knowing quite well it was Prymoxl's daughter, and annoyed with himself because he had forgot her name. He stood on the nipa mat, thinking hard, trying not to subject the girl to the slight inhospitality of having to make herself

known, when Solgat Sol came out of the southern cubicle making a deep bow. "Gentlefem Tilita," he gushed, "allow me to present my fortunate comrades. Gentlevir Zan Fadron, Gentlevir Thovas Tho and, lastly, your servant Gentlevir Solgat Sol, late muleteer of Azak Nak, now by the grace of the Void, a fellow citizen of Botomatl with yourself; allow me to relieve your burden." He was quite close to her when he finished this harangue, replaced his hat and lifted the platter from her head.

The girl seemed rather abashed at such an ornate introduction. She said simply: "I am Tilita." Then glancing from one to the other, she asked of Zan Fadron. "Are you my kinsman, Gentlehomo?"

Solgat Sol laughed: "No, Gentlefem, this colporteur has not a drop of your blood in his veins. Now I am of Yoovellusian descent by one of my great grandmothers; I am your real... ."

It had been Zan Fadron's intention all along to disaffirm the extraordinary kinship thrust upon him by Gogoma. This seemed a most natural opportunity. Therefore, he rather surprised himself a moment later by bending over the girl's hand, pressing it warmly and saying: "I cannot express how pleased I am to greet my prima."

When Thovas Tho was presented he greeted her as "Sistool Tilita," so the girl must have received a mixed idea of her relationship. The pretty and delightful girl placed her platter on the little table in Zan Fadron's cubicle, and the three men sat on the nipa rug, Outoolian fashion. The plat du jour was a baked fish garnished with some sort of transparent red berries of just the required sourness. Maize bread accompanied the fish.

Around this were grouped several zenoc items of cuisine, as well as tamarinds, kumquats, bread fruit, melons, and a jar of cow-tree juice, that queer sap that reproduces exactly a very rich dairy milk. It was Tilita's task to collect this sap for seven families living near Prymoxl's baobab. Bearing jars of arbol de vaca sap on her head had given the girl her splendid fluent walk.

"Where are the cow trees?" enquired Zan Fadron.

"Down by the lake, primo, near the Web of the Stars."

"What is that?" asked the promoter curiously.

"The place of sacrifice to the Stars, primo."

Zan Fadron paused in peeling a tamarind with an odd sense of pleasure in the fact that this vivid girl worshiped the Stars. The faith seemed to complement her shining green jacket which was made of leaves, plant fibers, and feather-work.

Thovas Tho put down a calabash of cow-tree milk and straightened. "Sistool Tilita," he began in his solemn drawl, "I hope you do not offer sacrifices to the Stars."

The enchanting girl's eyes widened. "Gentlehomo, I could not refuse my gifts and prayers to Those who give me life and food and warmth."

Thovas Tho rose, "My dear Sistool," he cried, "the true Gods have sent you a messenger... just wait a moment." He turned and started for his own cubicle.

This turn of affairs disturbed Zan Fadron oddly. He got to his feet with a word of excuse to his hostess and followed the colporteur. He found him getting into his Catechism packs. The caravan agent stood by, a little at a loss as to what he wanted to do. He cleared his throat and began uncertainly, "Eh, Thovas Tho, don't you think we'd better go over this matter carefully before beginning your work?"

The colporteur looked up at him astonished. "You!"

"Y-Yes, don't you think we'd better plan this carefully before starting our actual missionary campaign?"

"That's not what the first apostles of the Church of the Forerunner said, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Perhaps not. I... I don't exactly recall what those first apostles said, but this Tilita is a girl. She might get a garbled account of what you tell her, spread it and prejudice a great many important persons against the true religion to start with."

"The Catechism says a little child shall lead them, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Yes, yes, that may be true," agreed the promoter, annoyed by the ease with which Thovas Tho sniped him with these quotations, "but doesn't it say — lemme see, doesn't it say something about taking counsel together?" He looked appealingly to Thovas Tho to pilot him through unfamiliar waters.

The colporteur hesitated. "Well, the Catechism does say take ye counsel one with another," he laid down his packs uncertainly. "I want to do what's right, Brothool Zan Fadron."

The caravan agent drew a breath of relief. "I know you do, Thovas Tho. So do I," he added as an afterthought. Zan Fadron was surprised at the sudden opposition that had risen up in him against Thovas Tho's attack on the girl's faith. In reality, it was the artist in the promoter striving to prevent Thovas Tho from spoiling the picture. The thought of this warm vivid girl kneeling to the Void's twinkling stars was a harmony in violent values. It warmed Zan Fadron's heart like a draft of Zaspian Angel Nectar.

As the two returned empty-handed to the dinner, Zan Fadron was saying a little haphazardly: "We'll go over these plans carefully — this is a day of specialization — want to make a success."

As they walked into the western cubicle, Solgat Sol was showing the girl the withered spot on his neck and was saying: "... and my dying thought, Gentlefem, was that a beautiful arbol-de-vaca gatherer was stooping over me, lifting me, pressing me to her bosom with fiery kisses when my friend beat off the vampire with a

club and saved my life!"

Tilita shivered and touched the withered spot with the tip of her finger. "How fortunate for you, Gentlevir!" "Fortunate! Fortunate!" cried Solgat Sol, leaning toward her. "Gentlefem, to continue such a dream of such a girl, I would give the vampire the last drop of my blood. I never forgave my friend for waking me. I wish now some vampire... ."

"Oh, Gentlevir!"

"Indeed I do!"

Tilita's face was flushed when the caravan promoter interrupted the tête-a-tête. A little later the girl took her platter and jars to go home. Solgat Sol sprang up and relieved her of all her burdens and went with her.

Zan Fadron watched them walk away with clear-cut distaste. It seemed odd that the girl did not see through the absurdity of Solgat Sol's tales and the grossness of his flattery. He attributed to the girl his own sensitiveness. In fact, a man sometimes sees a reflection of his own qualities in a woman he admires. A man's love is sometimes partly self-esteem.

The satisfying dinner and the hush of noon sent the promoter back to his cubicle and into his hammock. Zan Fadron had been too long in the outback not to have adopted the Outoolian custom of the siesta. When he returned into the hammock he saw the hooks were of silver, and the ropes of the same silken colloidal material that was used by their assailant on the rim of the abyss. Another cord of the same stuff was attached to the bole of the tree. He was to use this to swing himself. He took it and began to oscillate gently.

He meant to think out the endless conundrums his situation imposed upon him. Where were Prymoxl's fourteen children? Had Gogoma or any of his ools climbed up on the cliff to slay their grimposauri? All of this suggested there was a secret road out of Botomatl. He yawned. If there were no escape from Botomatl, such a charming girl as Tilita would greatly ameliorate the... .

Overhead stretched the green gloom of the Hopeless paddlewood, through which penetrated a ray or two of noontime fulgor from the Constellation, Poised Knight. The darkoid Yoovellus revolved on its own axis, hence certain constellations would rise and set in the dark sky. Some constellations were brighter than others, making a huge difference to a low-beamer, especially with good quality implants. A talented low-beamer didn't even have to look up to tell which constellation was directly overhead; he could tell by the nature of the ambient light that his implants were amplifying from reflections off the ground and off objects around him. A good low-beamer could often thus tell the time without looking up, and without consulting a chronometer. He stared hazily up into the green caverns. The leaves nearest him were green-black against luminous yellow-greens farther aloft.

A humming bird hummed somewhere, and presently he saw it above him. It

was a steely blue in color and was poised so steadily he could see the articulations in its leg joints. It lowered itself very gently until it touched a tassel of the hammock spread over Zan Fadron's breast. Suddenly a giant, gorgeously colored zenoc butterflyoid flew into view. It was larger than both hands of a big man. In response, the hummingbird flashed upward with a zing, as if the devil had pounced at it. This odd play aroused a sleepy curiosity in Zan Fadron's mind. This changed to a thought of Tilita kneeling to the Stars.

Next moment he slept. He was welcomed by his recurring dream that the girl he loved was imprisoned and in urgent need of his help. But, his dream now had a new element; a pervading feeling that she was nearby. This time she was holding a clock in each hand. One clock's hands were turning clockwise; the other counterclockwise.

When the promoter awoke, the noontime Constellation, Poised Knight, was deep in the west. Weariness from his climb and a good dinner had kept him asleep longer than usual. He turned out briskly, with an odd sense of having some sort of engagement. He washed his head and neck in the water and arranged his tie by peering down at his reflection in the jar. He was meticulous with the tie. A little later he set out at a brisk stride toward old Prymoxl's baobab.

When he came in sight of the crone, she was sitting in front of her tree home with a mass of vicuna wool under her arm, spinning it into thread. She worked automatically with her eyes fixed in the direction of the declining constellation. Zan Fadron was quite upon her before she observed his coming. Then she turned with a little start out of some reverie.

"Ah, primo," she mumbled, "it is you."

"Are you alone, Gentlefem?"

"Oh, no, primo, I was just watching my knights go to rest."

"Your knights."

"My fourteen."

"I thought they had gone... ."

"They are in the Stars, primo." She fixed her eyes on the setting Constellation again. "I know they are signaling to me now with their little hands."

As Zan Fadron listened, the old woman's faith translated itself into his sympathy. She was really watching her fourteen children sink to rest in the twinkling Stars. They were as real to her as his own person standing beside her. He started to ask her how they had died when she continued; "I am an old woman, primo, and my beauty has gone, but I had no heart for the Stars. The Poised Knight's rise and fall meant nothing to me until my babies were taken from me."

There came a pause. In his heart, Zan Fadron was surprised and moved at the naturalness and simplicity of the old crone's faith. It seemed neither strange nor

exotic, but a most natural tenet for so simple a soul. Presently he enquired the way to the arbol de vaca forest. Prymoxl pointed the path toward the lake and returned to her maternal brooding on the setting of the Constellation, Poised Knight. Zan Fadron walked on quickly, and with a certain sense of buoyancy and pleasure that was unwonted.

Within half an hour the caravan agent had reached the lake, a considerable expanse of water with three or four reedy islands dotting its surface. Far down the lake a boat made from Hopeless reeds trailed a long golden "V" across the purple mirror. In the twinkling starshine of low-beam, the naked torso of the fisherman looked like a little copper figure leaning back and forth at the oars.

Toward the extreme east, the lake narrowed to a stream and flowed apparently straight into the eastern escarpment of the crater. The whole scene, the lake, the duplication in its depth of the encircling palisades, and the glittering peaks beyond, brought the promoter a keen sense of his own frustration. What an ironic end for his expedition... imprisoned by the magnificence he sought!

A point of Hopeless royal palms extended from the Hopeless forest to the water's edge some little distance down the beach, and Zan Fadron strolled toward them, attracted by the nervous beauty of the trees. When he rounded this point, he saw straight on ahead of him, carved in the face of the eastern rampart, the facade of an enormous temple.

He stood looking at it quite astounded. It was the teocalla, the Temple of the Stars of which Gogoma had spoken. The whole mile-high cliff had been wrought into a vast columniation, crowned by an immense entablature. The natural stripe in the crater had been seized on by the architect and carved into a frieze of colossal proportions.

The interior of the cliff evidently had been hollowed by immense labors because the facade was penetrated by circular-rayed windows, thus introducing the stars motif into architecture. Between the vast columns arose a maze of heroic figures, foliage, and geometrical designs in high relief. It reminded Zan Fadron of the triumphal sculpture on the heights of Natseegab on the planet Quels, or the cavern temples of Atnapeleeah on the planet Zasp. However, this was on a mightier scale than those heroic works.

Only when Zan Fadron moved toward the hypogeum did he full realize its dimensions. He was more than a mile distant, yet the vast facade seemed to tower over his head. It arose in the starshine, a golden miracle. As he moved toward it, his utter inability to exploit this wonder in the currents of world travel filled him with gall. It sickened him. Right before his eyes stood the coup of all modern tourist agencies. It meant millions of pulsars, ease, luxury. The promoter flung out his arms in a kind of rage at his own helplessness. If he could just get one word to Lapis Lazuli... . He blew out his breath like a sick ool and stood staring at the vast

temple with a sagging face.

Presently he became aware that someone was walking down the sand behind him. He turned and saw Solgat Sol and Tilita leading a young vicuna lamb by a cord. The girl evidently had seen Zan Fadron's gesture and heard his groan, for she called in a concerned voice: "Primo, what is the matter?"

Only after several moments did the promoter collect himself sufficiently to reply that it was nothing.

Tilita came over to him with sympathy in her eyes and the curve of her lips. "Gentlehomo, I see the setting of the Poised Knight brings sadness to you also. No doubt you have loved ones there." She glanced toward the receding Constellation.

"I was thinking... ." But then he grew ashamed of the covetousness of his thoughts and added: "Are you going to the temple?"

"Yes, Gentlevir."

"I will go with you."

Tilita assented by a movement and turned to Solgat Sol for the leading string of the young vicuna. The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil stared, puzzled, at the maneuver. "But, Gentlefem, I thought you said no man could accompany you to the sacrifice!"

Tilita looked at Solgat Sol surprised: "I said only a kinsman, Gentlehomo. He is my primo."

"Primo! Primo!" cried Solgat Sol with an amazed face. "Why he is not half so much as a primo as I!"

"But he is! My mother said so!"

Solgat Sol turned to the promoter and spoke in the Horgadilian language: "Gentlevir, you are not going to poach on my preserves in an affair of the heart on such a pretext as being a primo!?"

"My dear fellow," said Zan Fadron in Tilita's Outoolian dialect, and rather amused. "I am doing nothing. I am simply standing here."

"Yes, but you permit it!" snapped the Horgadilian in the same tongue.

"But she wouldn't have let you go with her anyway," smiled Zan Fadron.

"You can tell her you are not her primo!"

"And cause a gentlefem to lead her goat for herself? Do you think I am so unchivalrous?" Zan Fadron reached for the leading string, and it was surrendered to him.

The Horgadilian whirled on his heel. "Today Gentlevir, you insult me before my beloved, and call yourself my friend! Blessed Void! What sort of a friend is it that seizes... that seduces your woman! Friend!?"

Zan Fadron preserved a straight face with an effort. "What are we going to do

with this lamb, prima?'' he uttered with a faint accent on the ''prima'' for Solgat Sol's benefit.

''It is to feed my brothers and sisters, primo.''

''Oh, the fourteen?''

''Yes, primo,'' said the girl solemnly.

The fitness of the girl's faith gave Zan Fadron a queer but intense satisfaction. It seemed as decorative mentally, as physically were the curves of her body or her fluent step. Solgat Sol and his irritation faded from the agent's mind. They followed the sandy beach with the vicuna making little runs past them and being drawn up short by the cord. A small headland of stone broke the swing of the sand and projected out into the lake three or four hundred yards ahead of them. A stony, irregular path led from one of the entrances of the teocalla down to this headland.

This headland seemed to be Tilita's objective. When, presently, they walked up the little rise, Zan Fadron saw that it extended two arms out into the water and formed a small stony bay. Stretched over the bay, the caravan promoter was sharply surprised to see a kind of fireman's circular net. The whole inlet of water was not more than twenty-five feet wide. The net was moored to the rocks that formed a rough crescent about the bay. The supporting guys were glued to the stones and converged to a center like the spokes of a wheel.

Upon these guys were laid the woof of the net or hammock, circling round and round in ever increasing whorls. A certain geometrical precision about the hammock impressed Zan Fadron that great care had gone into its construction.

''Is that the Web of the Stars, prima?'' asked the ool curiously.

''Yes, primo''

''Now, what do we do?''

''When the Constellation, Butterflyoid, dips behind the cliff, primo, toss the lamb into the hammock.''

''Won't it fall out?''

''No, it will stick.''

Then Zan Fadron observed the glister of birdlime on the central cords of the netting, similar to Gogoma's hummingbird trap. Such elaborate paraphernalia interested Zan Fadron. Then he turned to the girl and with a certain feeling of intimacy, began to delve into the intricacies of her curious faith.

''How will your brothers and sisters get the lamb, prima?''

''The boat of the Stars will swim under the lake and take my offering,'' explained the girl simply.

Zan Fadron continued his attentive attitude and the girl continued: ''You see, during the day, some of the Stars and Constellations climb over the heavens on a great cord, such as you see in the web. By night the cord slides down behind

Botomatl and sails under this lake and comes out in the teocalla. Now, if my brothers and sisters in the Stars are hungry, our sacrifice will vanish as the Stars and Constellations pass under the lake; but if they are not hungry, it will remain and the priests will eat it because it is holy meat.''

The Darkool caravan agent repressed a smile at this naive method of replenishing the sacerdotal table.

''When you toss the lamb in, primo,'' went on the girl gravely, ''kneel at once by me with your back to the hammock and your face to the Stars and pray.''

''Yes, Gentlefem.''

''This is very important,'' she assured, large-eyed. ''If you should see one of the Star Gods come out in the net you would die.''

''Yes, prima.''

Tilita looked at the dipping Stars and Constellations. ''Now, primo.'' She knelt on the stones.

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent picked up the lamb with a queer sensation, at this, the first religious rite he had ever performed in his life. The pet vicuna lay in his arms and began nuzzling at his poncho after the fashion of lambs. The little animal's trust sent a faint repugnance along his nerves at sacrificing it to Gogoma's table. He glanced around. The watery smell of the lake was very noticeable. His low-beams gave a deep orange note to the starshine over cliffs, and peaks and temple. The kneeling girl brought a sort of wistful melting into Zan Fadron's breast.

There was no other human or zenoc creature in sight except the small dark figure of Solgat Sol far up the sand. They were alone. As the last portion of a particular Constellation disappeared over the horizon, Zan Fadron turned and tossed the lamb into the center of the net. The lime gripped it in a twisted attitude and held it immovable. It rested quietly, without a struggle. The man turned and knelt at Tilita's side. He could faintly hear the girl whispering her vesper prayer. Her face wore the ecstatic expression that he had seen on the faces of Zaspian girls in Zaspian cathedrals.

At that moment he heard a ripple in the water behind him. Surprise and curiosity pulled him about when Tilita's hands caught his face, covered his eyes and held his head against her shoulder. Her palms were small and firm and smelled of milk.

She held him in a flattering captivity for ten or fifteen seconds. Then came another rippling behind them. She loosed him with a shuddering breath. Her face was chalky against her black hair.

''Oh my dear cousin,'' she shivered, ''how you frightened me! If you had moved, Pachacamac would have snatched you from me!'' Zan Fadron stared at the bloodless face. He arose a little nervously and helped her up. Then he looked into the

web of the Stars. It was empty. The lamb was gone.

When he raised his eyes, he saw darkness covered the mighty face of the teocalla, but out of its rayed windows poured a brilliance as if the sinking Constellations had amplified themselves and risen again inside the cliff. A veritable fountain of light beat outward from the interior. The round windows glared down on the man and the woman in the surrounding darkness. In a few minutes the light winked out as swiftly as it had sprung into being.

CHAPTER 11

The disappearance of the lamb from the net registered a shock on the promoter's nerves which he did not realize until night. Then, however, it asserted itself in his dreams and troubled his sleep.

The moment he lost consciousness he fancied himself back at the lakeside with the vicuna in his arms ready to throw it into the net. Every detail was precisely as he had experienced it during the evening, except, just when he was ready to throw, the little vicuna changed into Tilita. He blinked and Tilita was transformed into the beloved blond of his dreams with a face that he still could not make out.

He was under some horrible compulsion to fling Tilita into the net. She was clinging to him, beseeching. He could feel her form pressed against him, her milky palm against his face; then just as he swung her into destruction, he awoke with a violent start, gasping for breath, with a hammering heart and a sweating body.

Time after time he was startled awake by this nightmare. The night seemed endless. At his last awakening, he saw, with a great sense of relief, the first silver of dawn which was an automatic — turn on the light-function of his night-vision, retinal implants. He turned on his two-beams, which was a mode in which low-beams and high-beams both operated simultaneously. He opened his eyes a tiny crack and threw light around his cubicle; then began whitening the jungle. The sight came over him like a balm, for he knew if he fell asleep again, it would be dreamless; since he was now out of his normal sleepdream time.

By opening his eyes wider, the dull silver strengthened in the airy chamber of the Hopeless paddlewood. Dew, dripping from the leaves made a faint wide pattering. A belated firefly glowed and paled against the dark bole of the tree. The promoter lay looking at the firefly. Its delicate yellow fire was on the verge of sending him to sleep again when gradually he became aware that some one had entered his cubicle.

Without looking he knew it was Thovas Tho. The colporteur retained his rustic habit of rising during the latter hours of the night, to what purpose Zan Fadron never could discover. Zan Fadron turned off his night-vision implants, and closed his eyes and wooed the sleep the firefly had promised, but the knowledge that

Thovas Tho was standing beside him frustrated his inhospitable design. Finally, without looking or moving, he said: "Well?"

"Are you awake, Brothool Zan Fadron?"

"I haven't slept all night." The promoter opened his eyes.

The colporteur had a pack of Catechisms on his back evidently just ready to set off on his crusade.

"J'want anything?" slurred the caravan agent at last.

The colporteur fumbled with his pack, moved uneasily and at last blurted out: "What was troubling you so, Brothool Zan Fadron, that you couldn't sleep?"

Zan Fadron groggily explained to him the content of his recurring dream, to which Thovas Tho responded: "I too have been having troublin' dreams, Brothool Zan Fadron. I often dream I'm in the outback, goin' from canyon to canyon; crater to crater, lookin' for any type of reflectin' surface. When I find such a surface I take a gander into it, but instead of seein' a reflection of my face and body; I see a serpent's head and body. Next to the serpent is my beloved Ludia Faba, except she's also transformed into a serpent. In my dream I haven't seen my dearly beloved Ludia Faba in twenty-five years, but I never get explanation why. Oddly enough, in the dream, we're perfectly content with being serpents. I assume that my Forerunner Lords have sent me this dream as a message that I'm not spreadin' the Word as fast and as hard as I should be. I must try harder at spreadin' the Word, Brothool Zan Fadron. You got more education than I have... ."

The promoter let that pass.

"But I've read the Catechism more than you have."

"You certainly have," yawned Zan Fadron.

"And you could easily... er... quite easily... ah... fall into sin and not know it, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Sin!" The promoter opened his eyes fully and looked at the colporteur with a faint amusement in them.

"Yes, sir, sin," he repeated doggedly.

"What kind of sin?"

"You bent your knee to an Idol."

The promoter lifted his head. "To... what?"

"To an Idol."

"Thovas Tho, what are you driving at?"

The revivalist plucked up his determination. "Forerunner Gods have mercy on you, Brothool Zan Fadron, have you fell into sin unbeknownst?"

"But when... where... what...?"

"Why, yestiddy evening!" cried the colporteur. "I saw you kneelin' beside

that idolatrous woman down yonder by the lake joinin' her in her filthy and idolatrous worship of an idol."

The promoter stared at the stocky little man with a growing amusement.

"Why that didn't amount to anything, Thovas Tho. I didn't pray."

"But you bent the knee."

The definite article before "knee" increased Zan Fadron's mirth.

"Yes, I bent the knee," he admitted in faint burlesque.

"Was it in mawkery?"

"Well, no, it wasn't exactly in mockery either."

Thovas Tho shook his head. "Brothool Zan Fadron, to bend the knee to an idol is strickly against the Forerunner God's holy Word. I hope the Forerunner Lords'll touch your heart, Brothool Zan Fadron." From this the colporteur glided into an invocation: "Oh Forerunner Lords, do touch his hard heart! Look down on this idolatrous and adulterous man, Forerunner Lords, and smite him with conviction. He don't know you, Forerunner Lords, but he has let a strange woman lead him to the altar of an idol. Save him, Forerunner Gods! Save Brothool Zan Fadron from consortin' with the idolatrous women! Save him from his filthy lusts! Save... ."

Ah, this was in true backwood revival style where the praying heaps every form of abuse and contumely on the audience but the promoter was not accustomed to any such blanket pleas for pardon. He sat up sharply. "Look here," he interrupted. "Where do you get all that stuff about filthy lusts? A prayer is a prayer, but... ."

The colporteur came out of his singsong and looked steadily at his friend. "Didn't you kneel down by her side because she was a woman, Brothool Zan Fadron?"

The promoter was angry. "I did it just as I would with any sincere worshiper, Thovas Tho. I hope I am broad-minded enough in my views not to allow creed or... ."

"Brothool Zan Fadron," drawled the colporteur unruffled. "I've been prayin' to the Forerunner Gods for your soul every mornin' and night for over a month and a half. You've seen me lots of times, but you never have knelt down by my side."

The promoter reached up and scratched his jaw. "Well, I... I overlooked it."

"No, you didn't, Brothool Zan Fadron."

This ushered in an uncomfortable pause. During the pause, Zan Fadron pondered which would most become his dignity, to answer this reflection with quiet denial, or with that restrained sarcasm, of which Zan Fadron, in common with most other men, considered himself a master, or simply to say nothing. Further reflection convinced him there was little to say.

It was Thovas Tho who began again: "Do you know what the Catechism says in its blessed thirteenth chapter and twenty-eighth verse, Brothool Zan Fadron?"

"No... it. I don't!" snapped the promoter, forming an instant prejudice against the Catechism words on any subject whatever.

"Well, it says there is no king of men, beloved of the Forerunner Gods, who is not sometimes tempted by outlandish women who cause him to sin." The colporteur stopped flatly on the word "sin."

"So that's what it says!"

"That's what it says, Brothool Zan Fadron," responded the Darkool from the darkoid Fligsid, unruffled. "And if your intentions are honorable, Brothool Zan Fadron, as I hope they be, I will quote ye the next verse, which may fit your case to a tiddyyumtum. In the next verse the Catechism says 'Hearken ye unto this great evil!'" Here Thovas Tho shook his finger at the promoter. "'Hearken ye unto this evil, ye who transgress against the Forerunner Gods in marrying strange wives' — strange wives — hearken ye — are you harking, Brothool Zan Fadron, if that fits you any better?"

To Zan Fadron's relief, Thovas Tho took down his finger and adjusted his Catechism packs. "Well, I got to be going now," he said in a casual tone. "You think them things over, Brothool Zan Fadron. It's for your good I'm saying 'em. You see, Brothool Zan Fadron, we've got souls both of us. If it wasn't fer that, I'd fade out your sin and go you one better, Brothool Zan Fadron." Then the colporteur moved away with his pack on his back and presently was lost in the faint morning light.

For several minutes the promoter sat rather stunned at this onslaught. It was so utterly undeserved. Then the humor of the thing seeped in to him and he began smiling; presently the phrase "strange wives" revisited his imagination.

One of the distinctive differences between the mindsets of Quels and Zasp, between pessimism and optimism, is that to one the word "strange" connotes something sinister; to the other, something glamorous. The Darkools on the darkoids within the Zasp-Quelsian sphere of influence were about equally divided among the two schools of thought. There is little doubt that when the authors of the Catechism wrote said quoted verses, they were far from meaning any flattery when they used the expression "strange wives."

To Darkool hearers, steeped in Quelsian pessimism, the expression "strange wives" would have carried no exciting commendation. But the spirit of peoples change with their geography and with other factors; and this changing spirit is very likely to breathe new connotations into one and the same expression. In Zan Fadron's ears, the expression, "strange wives," carried a certain lure. So he sat musing in his hammock and repeated aloud two or three times — "a strange woman — a strange wife — an idolatrous woman —" and the phrases spread colorful intentions before the dreamer. They suggested bizarre wooings, gorgeous and

barbaric ceremonies and exotic satisfactions — "a strange wife."

He fancied himself marrying Tilita in the vast baroque temple of the Stars. He could see himself kneeling with her before a golden altar. Above them stood the vast naked Gogoma, dripping with sweat, and anointing with perfume; the beat of barbaric music, then their return to one of these vast trees, the slow luxury of day and night, the springing up of children about them, many children, such as old Prymoxl bore and, of whom, only one remained.

But theirs would not fade. They would be happy, laughing, half arboreal little cherubs and they, in their turn, would come and kneel in the temple of the Stars, and so life would go on. The flare of color suggested by this vision shivered through the poet. However, there was something else about it that made him shiver even more; the fact that in this reverie Tilita had the blond hair of the beloved girl from his recurring dream, and Tilita had a face whose features he couldn't quite distinguish.

He arose briskly, shook off his absurd day dream and dressed himself, for it was now plain day. The thought of Prymoxl's children somehow suggested the Web of the Stars. In the more rational, false daylight, the promoter made a shrewd guess as to the function of the net. It was merely a priestly device for collecting tithes and meats for the sacerdotal table. The mysterious disappearance of the lamb, which had given him a turn the preceding evening, no doubt was nothing more than some priestly hocus-pocus. He decided that he would walk down and look more closely into the mechanism of the contrivance. The promoter set out lakeward and after some thirty minutes' brisk walking reached the lake and the stony inlet where the net was stretched. The agent clambered down the stones for a more detailed inspection of the hammock.

It was an ingeniously made contrivance. The whorl of limed cords in the center were a marvelous mechanism. Each strand was made of two hollow tubes twisted together and filled with a viscous limy material. This limy liquid oozed out through the colloidal tubes and constantly renewed their sticky surfaces. Instead of drying in the hot air-temperature, the net grew stickier and stickier. Zan Fadron took a shaft of Hopeless bamboo from a bit of jetsam at the edge of the lake, then went back and touched it to this viscid center. When he tried to pull it away, the strands untwisted and resisted his pull with the flexibility of limed rubber. If a captive drew out one foot, it would surely thrust the other into a deeper viscosity.

It was such a powerful and devilish gin that Zan Fadron's surprise expanded to wonderment. This was far too much craft to expend on a mere priestly device for gathering alms. It held sinister implications. The priests of the Stars would not construct a club to kill a midge. This net was far beyond the strength of a vicuna lamb, or a vicuna; the thing would have held a tiger. Such preparations suggested a far grimmer purpose than holding a lamb for Gogoma's table.

The promoter stepped gingerly on the first transverse cord, and then from cord to cord, toward the limed center. He stood balancing himself, speculating on the thing. No doubt the hot climate developed this contrivance. Meat for the temple must be kept alive or it would spoil. So this extraordinary fabrication had been evolved by necessity, that fecund mother of all inventions. The same ingenuity turned toward aviation would have flown over the encircling cliffs to freedom!

The water over which the net was suspended was a profound blue and appeared of great depth. It was full of shadows and half forms. Amid the reflections of rocks and Hopeless palms and distant palisades, he saw the slow sway of Hopeless undergrowth; then presently made out a sort of pale blob that protruded from some subaqueous cavern. He shaded his eyes with his hands and peered down with high-beams. It was confused with the reflection of a solitary cloud. At last he decided he would thrust his shaft of bamboo down and punch the thing. It might be the clew to the whole contrivance. He was addressing his pole for this purpose when a voice on the bank called to him sharply to desist.

Surprise brought Zan Fadron up, and he saw a tall raw-boned red man with the priestly heron feather in his hair. Besides, he was armed with a long pole with an obsidian blade on it, something like an elongated scythe. Coiled around his arm was a great loop of the colloidal rope used in the net. The fellow looked as if he might have been sent down from the temple to mow down the trespasser on the net, so Zan Fadron got ashore and asked what was the matter.

"It is dangerous there, Gentlehomo."

"What's the danger?"

The fellow drew down an ironic mouth. "One does not care to rush into the bright mansions of the Stars, before it is absolutely necessary, Gentlevir."

A certain cynicism about this remark caused the promoter to look him over carefully.

"I am Jagala, a priest and a rope gatherer," said the man as he shook the coil on his arm, "and the holy Gogoma told me of you, a Gentlesap, Zan Fadron."

The caravan promoter acknowledged the introduction. "A rope gatherer?"

"Yes, Gentlehomo."

"Don't you mean a rope maker?"

"I make this rope?" Jagala had a long face, and now the lift of his pointed brows gave him a Mephistophelean look.

"Well someone makes it!" cried Zan Fadron.

"No one makes it, Gentlevir. I gather it from the cliffs."

"How does it come there?" interrogated the promoter.

Jagala shrugged. "It is the gift of the Stars, Gentlesap. When certain Stars and certain Constellations climb down the side of the cliff into the lake."

"I've heard all that."

"If you don't believe it, Gentlehomo," defended the rope gatherer, "just look at this rope and tell me if any man can make such a rope!"

Zan Fadron took the rope and re-perused it for the hundredth time. "You really mean to tell me you find this cordage hanging from the cliffs?"

"Yes, Gentlevir."

"And you have no idea how it came there?"

"Gentlesap," snapped the priest. "I have told you twice that the Stars in Their climb down the sides of the cliff leave this rope as a gift to Their people!"

The caravan agent nodded, "Yes, yes," and stood studying the rope, with an occasional glance at the Web of the Stars. As he stood looking first at one, then at the other, he saw something slowly rising through the water beneath the net. The priest also saw it for he walked down to the margin of the lake, thrust his pole and hook under the net and drew the object to him. He swung it out on the stones. To Zan Fadron's amazement, it was the very lamb he had thrown into the net on the preceding evening. The little creature was stiff and water soaked. Its legs were bound tightly to its body by several turns of the mysterious rope. Jagala clipped one end of this binding cord with his obsidian blade, tossed the little animal back into the water, and unwound the cord by letting the cadaver revolve in the water.

As he salvaged the line, he wound it on his arm with the rest of his bindings. When Jagala finished, the promoter took his shaft of bamboo and fished the dead body out on the stones. Jagala strolled on back toward the temple. After the carcass had dried out somewhat, Zan Fadron settled himself for a careful study of the dead animal.

Its throat was not cut. The region over the heart where butchers stick their kills was intact. A painstaking search over its whole body failed to discover the slightest blemish to its skin. Its death duplicated the slaying of the pack grimposauri on the cliff. Apparently the priestly contrivance could destroy at a distance, or else some athletic fellow like Jagala climbed the cliff. The promoter was considering which of these clews he would pursue when he started to arise, and pressed down on the cadaver to lift himself. His hand crushed into the body as if it had been an empty sack. Zan Fadron drew out his knife and opened the vicuna.

The viscera of the little creature seemed dried up. Its heart was a blackish knot; its entrails might have been tripe. If some one had turned a tinner's blowpipe into the lamb, it would have produced the same desiccated appearance. It was another link in the chain of enigmas that surrounded existence in Botomatl.

By the time Zan Fadron finished his inspection it was high noon. Profound silence and a low-beam fulgor of starshine from the Constellation, Poised Knight, lay over lake and temple. The vicuna was spread open before Zan Fadron, and the brilliance of the light upon its withered entrails accented its sinister signifi-

cance.

A vast loneliness fell over the promoter. With all these grim riddles accumulating about him, there was not one person in all the crater from whom he could expect even a sensible discussion of the matter. Solgat Sol was superstitious, and besides had been rather grumpy toward the agent since their little tiff over Tilita. Thovas Tho solved every riddle by a religious quote straight out of the blue. If the priests knew, they retained their knowledge; and as for old Prymoxl and other ordinary Outools, they were in as hopeless a welter of theological explanation as Thovas Tho.

Zan Fadron's own brain had come to a complete balk; yet he had a profound feeling that it was because he had no human or zenoc contact by which he could orientate himself. He felt, in his heart, if he had just one ordinary ool-on-the-street, picked up off of Maiden Lane in Lapis Lazuli on the way to Tamen Kun park; an ool who would think straight, whose brain did not skid at once into absurdities, he would solve it.

Moreover the solution must be hovering almost in sight. One isolated conundrum may prove insoluble, but half a dozen, all focusing on the same point are mutually explanatory and suggestive. He was amazed; he was chagrined that the Web of the Stars lay under his eyes as inscrutable as the first time he ever saw it.

Presently into the promoter's self disgust crept the murmur of distant voices. They were just audible and for several minutes did not interrupt Zan Fadron's brooding. Indeed, this slight human touch somehow helped the agent to his first tenable theory. It was exceedingly simple. An underground tunnel led from temple to net. The priests had watched him from the window and had timed the thrusting out of the vicuna under his eyes to help mystify him. It was the simplest of ruses; worthy of an intelligence such as Jagala's.

Then he attacked the problem of the peculiar condition of the lamb, but just here the voices he had heard became so loud as to distract his thought. It was a man and a woman quarreling. He became attentive and could distinguish the edged tilts of a woman's soprano, and the peculiar monotonous buzzing of a man's baritone which mark the sexes in anger.

He looked over the crest of the little knoll and presently saw two figures emerge from the Hopeless palms coming toward the beach. The woman carried a calabash. Both were gesticulating angrily. Their voices reared at each other. Suddenly the man seized her free hand. The woman screamed, tried to wrench loose, when her companion caught her in his arms and began one of those dodging struggles to kiss her. She dropped the calabash, clawed at his face and twisted her head from side to side to escape his lips.

Had Zan Fadron been a younger man, he would have rushed to the assistance of the assaulted beauty, but he was wise, he watched the love fight with the amused

tolerance of a bachelor of twenty-five. The grand passion often takes the form of playful blows and resisted kisses. The result of these hostilities would be another tree commandeered for housekeeping in Botomatl. At that instant Zan Fadron saw the girl was Tilita.

The promoter leaped to his feet with a kind of spasm in his chest. Next instant he was in full charge down the slope and up the sand. The glare of his two-beams went red. The man's back was to him, but Tilita saw him and screamed, "Primo!"

Next moment the fellow whirled. For an instant, Zan Fadron saw Solgat Sol staring at him with a bloodless face. The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil made a grab for his needler. Tilita's arms prevented it. Zan Fadron jumped in with a furious swing at the red man's chin. Solgat Sol yelled and dodged. Next moment the two men went down on the sand together.

The promoter fell on top, but his attack was ineffective from its very fury. He grabbed the Horgadilian man's hair and jounced his head against the ground. He loosed a hand to drive his fist repeatedly into the rascal's mouth and cheeks, causing the wretch's mustache to twist into monstrous shapes. He punched the forehead, trying to smash the red countenance.

The muleteer used only one hand for defense; with the other he grappled under his hip for his needler. He wriggled and pitched and sputtered Horgadilian oaths. He almost threw Zan Fadron over his head by heaving up his stomach, but the promoter, lunging and lurching, pounded the saddle-colored face with every blow, raising a splotch.

It was a mere spurt of fighting, but Zan Fadron tired as swiftly as he fought. He was soft to the core. In two minutes his head was roaring and his mouth so full of slime he could hardly breathe. He seemed in a furnace. Sweat ceased to flow on him. He was burning up. Suddenly he saw that Solgat Sol was drawing his needler. He grabbed the muleteer's elbow. During the pause, Solgat Sol caught Zan Fadron's right arm. They came to a straining impasse. The promoter stared into Solgat Sol's bleeding face. Gradually the red man's needler arm strained out. Zan Fadron flung all his failing force against it, but the muleteer's sweaty skin slipped through his hold. A panic seized Zan Fadron.

He suddenly realized he would be killed. In three minutes he would have his brains blown out over a half-breed girl's kiss! It was absurd! He tried to pant out some words through his slimy mouth, to reason before... he clenched desperately!

"Solgat Sol!"

At that moment, a third hand was laid on Solgat Sol's needler arm and stopped it absolutely.

"Here Gentlevirs," called a cheerful voice. "Have you forgot what the Catechism says? 'How good it is for brothools to dwell together in unity?' Git up

Brothools. Leave off this scuffling and rejoice with me!''

As Thovas Tho's fresh strength had complete control of the situation, both ools let go. The colporteur lifted Zan Fadron by one arm and got him to his feet. Then he picked up the maltreated muleteer, keeping one hand casually on the needler arm. He brushed aside the whole affair as trivial. ''Brothools rejoice with me!'' he cried. ''I have garnered three souls into the blessed fold of the Forerunner Masters!''

The promoter stared unsteadily at the jubilant colporteur. The blood pounded in Zan Fadron's ears and his head was splitting. It was all he could do to keep from falling.

The Horgadilian spat out a mouthful of blood, touched his raw face, but said with a certain return of his habitual courtesy: ''Gentlevir, that is good news!''

''Glorious news!'' paeaned the colporteur. ''And it was all accomplished, my dear Brothool Solgat Sol, in the twinkling of an eye, through a miracle!''

''A miracle,'' repeated Solgat Sol, starting toward the lake to wash out his mouth.

''Yes, a miracle, with the aid of ordinary oxygen-generating, parlor matches! I never saw a more divine manifestation. I'll ask you two brothools now, to give me all the matches you happen to have in your pockets.''

Both the fighters fished out their lucifer and handed them over. Then Zan Fadron walked unsteadily over to the girl where she stood clinging to a Hopeless palm. Every nerve in the man jangled. He could not make heads or tails of what Thovas Tho was saying.

''Come on, Tilita, come on!'' Before he could say more, he spat out ropy saliva. The two started off aimlessly through the Hopeless jungle. Thovas Tho and Solgat Sol walked on down to the lake. Thovas Tho was drawling away with great enthusiasm about his miracle.

CHAPTER 12

Presently the promoter drew on Tilita's arm and moderated what was a flight down to a walk. He could not hurry so fast; his head was aching too badly. The girl slowed up trembling and glanced back through the jungle. Her breast rose and fell sharply under her green bodice.

''H-He is a terrible man, primo,'' she panted.

Zan Fadron glanced down at his companion. The struggle with Solgat Sol had left red welts on her neck and breast and cheeks. One of her ears was crimson where his beard had scraped. Such tangibilia of her outrage renewed Zan Fadron's fury. The pressure in his aching head increased.

''I... I ought to have killed him!'' he gasped remorsefully. ''I... I wonder why I didn't kill him?'' He tried to think. The fight was blurred in his mind. He plodded

on trying to reconstruct it, trying to discover why he had failed to kill the Horgadilian.

Tilita moved at his side through splotches of shade and starshine. Presently it gave her the appearance of moving under some sort of luminous tapestry that rose and fell with her gliding progress. She gave Zan Fadron brief side glances and presently said, quite unexpectedly: "I mean primo, that Gentlevir Thovas Tho is a terrible man."

Zan Fadron looked around, quite taken aback. "Thovas Tho!"

"Yes, I hate him!" she accented the word with a narrowing of her black eyes.

"And not Solgat Sol!"

"Oh... no." She shrugged and evidently dismissed the Horgadilian's case with slight concern.

"After what he's done?"

"The poor fellow could not help himself."

"Couldn't help himself!"

"He said he couldn't help himself, primo," she uttered defensively.

A foolish feeling came over Zan Fadron. Apparently he had been attempting murder over a foible, over mere bad manners, such as the ditzoid secretaries had used in the Lapis Lazuli offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. when they gossiped, flirted and buffed their fingernails in public. Zan Fadron felt trifled with.

"Tilita," he said grimly. "If you didn't object to his... ."

"I did object, and fight every time!" defended the girl sharply.

The number of times implied left Zan Fadron blank, simple, and completely numb! Tilita proceeded with some embarrassment: "He said he couldn't help, er, the way he did. He said every time he looked at me, a... a sort of... well, I... I don't know, primo, I don't understand it. He said a sort of wild fury... ."

"Merciless Void!" groaned the promoter, "has he been telling you that sort of stuff, and you believing it?"

"Well primo, he acted as if it were true." Her voice tilted up in a clear note on "true," which signified that while she deferred to Zan Fadron's wider experience, to the best of her knowledge and belief, an amorous mania certainly seized Solgat Sol when he came into her presence.

Zan Fadron was utterly disgusted, and yet somehow obscurely pleased with her innocent stupidity.

"Tilita," he remonstrated, "you can't believe what a man says... no pretty girl can. Blessed Void, I can hear him now, buzzing away, working himself up, explaining how he has been dreaming, yearning, burning for a beautiful arboldevaca gatherer, and how the sight of you causes a madness to rush upon him, then I suppose he made a dive at you for a strangle hold."

A chastened nodding affirmed these deductions.

"Well, take it from me, Tilita, no man ever gets so far but what he can't turn around and walk off if he wants to; just turn around and walk off... like that," he snapped his fingers, "they can all do it... if they want to. The trouble is, getting them to want to."

Here he broke off. His head throbbed too badly for talk. He kicked out of his path a scarlet and purple Hopeless orchid which he could have sold for a thousand pulsars or two to the Zaspian greenhouses as an unknown variety.

Tilita rolled her black eyes around at him, and he was unable to tell whether his counsel had impressed her or not. It irritated him.

"Look here," he burst out, "how many times has he... no, don't answer that; it's none of my affair. We'll drop the subject."

"Two times."

Zan Fadron drew an easier breath. It eased his head somewhat. But nevertheless he wondered why women would listen to such piffle. It was amazing in a girl of Tilita's intelligence! It seemed to him that the most inexperienced female could penetrate so impudent an advance.

He became aware that the girl was smiling to herself. The whiteness of her teeth lit up her black eyes and scarlet lips in a lovely way. The smile somehow vexed the dignified caravan agent.

"Tilita," he suggested, "it seems to me after what has occurred... ."

She became serious again — almost serious. The girl had a fruity look. Her skin absorbed the light from his high-beam like a ripe pear and then glowed gently at the agent. She looked as if she had soaked from the jungle its lumoplastic fulgor, its intensity of color, its pressure of vitality. Undoubtedly man is the modest sex. Men spend much cleverness in trying to veil their women, and women spend much more cleverness in getting unveiled.

Zan Fadron fumbled through his clothing and found a pin; he handed it to her. "Your jacket is torn," he suggested briefly.

The girl took the pin, tested its strength curiously. Evidently it was the first she had ever seen. "How small and strong it is," she admired.

"Fasten your jacket with it," said the promoter.

On low-beam, the man studied the fall of starlight through the Hopeless jungle while she fixed the rent.

"How old are you, Tilita?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Thirteen, primo."

Zan Fadron was thunderstruck. "Thirteen!"

"Yes, primo. Why?"

Zan Fadron was constrained to make another calculation in regard to old

Prymoxl's age. She was probably not over twenty-six or eight.

"I just wanted to know. You seem older."

The girl looked at him anxiously. "Do I look old?"

"No-o, not the way you mean; you look developed."

"Oh, yes." She colored faintly.

Zan Fadron appraised her, unable to understand it. How was it possible in thirteen little years to fashion such a beautiful creature? Then, too, her swift flowering foretold her swift decay. He thought of Prymoxl, that rag. Only a little time ago she must have been as beautiful as her daughter. The promoter pursued his queer calculations. The ancient Prymoxl was only a year or two older than he, himself. When he first started studying Instantcourses in the offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., Tilita was only eight years old. Now here he was on a romantic stroll with the girl through the jungle. The thought gave him a queer feeling of being a sort of human mountain and watching flowers bloom and perish on its slopes.

It cast a sort of pathos over the girl. Her beauty would be so brief. It was the grace of a swallow sailing against the evening sky, that vanished in the making. Zan Fadron looked at her and wondered if she were up out of this crater, would the higher, cooler altitudes preserve her volatile loveliness? He thought of Lapis Lazuli and his apartment there. If he were married to Tilita and could escape this human hothouse of Botomatl, he could domicile her in his high-rise pad on Maiden Lane near Tamen Kun Park. He could take her to see the vaudeville, the plays, the holomovies. Yet, when he shut his eyes for a second to imagine it, his mind's eye only saw himself with a blond who had a blur for a face. On each side of the face was a large clock, whose hands were turning for one clockwise, for the other, counterclockwise.

The incongruity of such an idea set the promoter laughing. Tilita was surprised and wanted to know the reason. The promoter could not hope to explain his mental meanderings to the girl, so he asked: "How came you to be so angry at Thovas Tho, Tilita?"

The smile on the girl's face vanished abruptly, and Zan Fadron discovered that her countenance had that extraordinary quality of seeming to look its best in whatever mood it wore. About one woman out of three or four million possesses this charm.

"He... but he is your friend, primo."

"Yes, he is."

"Then let's not talk of it."

A grotesque suspicion filtered through Zan Fadron's brain.

"You don't mean that he... and Solgat Sol both ... ."

"Oh no-o-o!" cried Tilita, outraged at the thought of Thovas Tho caressing her. "I know what he said to you this morning."

The promoter stared at her.

"To me?" he asked blankly.

Tilita's lips quivered. "He was talking about me." The promoter looked at the girl trying to think back to the morning. "Gentlevir Solgat Sol told me," she added.

Just then Zan Fadron recalled Thovas Tho's Catechismic discussion. "Oh, that."

The girl nodded sharply, searching his face.

"That was nothing."

"He said evil things against me," declared Tilita hotly. "He said you were wicked even to know me."

From her wrath it was evident that Solgat Sol had informed her fully of the conversation and all its implications. It embarrassed the promoter.

"Why did you let him say such things of me?" she pressed.

"Really, Tilita, you, you can't very well tell what a man's going to say till he says it."

"You let him talk on."

"I couldn't stop him."

"Why?"

"He's a sort of preacher."

"A preacher... ."

"Yes, a... a preacher is a man you pay to say disagreeable things; you can't take offense at a fellow, you know, when he's on his job."

Zan Fadron hoped this little skit would make her smile. Instead she grew angrier, opened her eyes wider and seemed taller.

"If you pay him to say such things of me," she declared passionately, "you believe him!"

"Why, I don't pay him!" cried the promoter astonished.

"You said you did."

Zan Fadron was upset.

"Believe what? I was talking in a general way about preachers, a sort of joke. What do I believe? What are you talking about?"

"You believe it?" cried the girl curiously moved. "He said I was a strange woman, a wicked woman that I would be a strange wife... strange... strange... What is strange about me?

She flung out her arms in a passion of self-revelation. She was on the verge of sobbing. The pin he had given her pulled loose.

The hint of "marriage" on Tilita's lips set up a surprising emotional resonance

in the caravan agent.

It amazed him that she held the same thought that he had just indulged. A sudden hammering filled his chest.

"Why, Tilita," he said shakenly. "I... I don't think you are strange."

"But that man said... ."

"It makes no difference." His voice was cut off by a sort of stricture in his throat. "My little prima," he said huskily. He reached out toward her. At the touch of her flesh, a sort of languor flowed up his arms and filled his body.

The notion that she was "strange," that any atom of her was "strange" to him! With his lips to her ear, he whispered shakily: "Tilita dear, the blood in my heart is not more... ." He wavered into silence as her warmth and softness filled his arms. He could feel her trembling. He, himself, was so shaken he could hardly stand. The smell of milk on her lips and throat was headier than wine.

"I was so afraid I would be a strange wife."

Heaven only knew what construction she placed upon the word "strange." They remained clinging to each other. To stand became a burden. By common impulse they moved across to a tree. By glancing down the man could see her black lashes outlined against her cheek and the irregular lift and fall of her fully developed bosom. A starshine splotch fell through a rent in her bodice and filled it with half lights.

Because he, in his reverie, had thought of marrying her, Zan Fadron fumbled, trying to close the tear. At touch of her, a great weakness seized him. It beat in his chest. It throbbed in his neck. It swam in his brain. Yet, it was a kind of rest.

How long Zan Fadron experienced this transfiguration, he never knew. It was a moment; it was an eternity. It had no connection with Time. Time was a pipe organ chanting its processional and its recessional; but in its midst, Time ceased. It came vaguely to Zan Fadron that such ecstasy was the goal of life; that all life was like an ocean and this wave of divinity moved through its floods. For an instant it lifted all men and all women to its iridescent crest. Then it passed on. Other droplets would take their places, but that man and that woman would never again know that height of ecstasy together.

Yet the wave was perpetual. It rode on and on through existence, leaping at the sky, shot with holorainbows, scattering jewels, a delirious immortality, composed of instants; a Buddha of bliss, composed of fading entities.

Very slowly the jungle reformed about the couple. Under high-beams, the Hopeless trees dripped with light. The silhouette of a monkey passed across their luminous background. A little bird flung out a triumphant phrase over the capture of a worm.

The promoter watched the little gladiator idly. It was a striped bird with a yel-

low breast. Zan Fadron had seen such songsters in Tamen Kun Park. He knew that offdarkoid, on worlds with suns, that such tiny creatures drift from the arctic to the tropics with the shifting seasons, a migration of jewels.

Zan Fadron closed his eyes for the first time in a while. He shut off his night-vision completely. Yet he could still see some afterglow, like a halo. In the center of this halo he could see Tilita... or was it Tilita? If Tilita, why was her jet black hair replaced with blond; and why was her face a blur. On each side of her face was a clock, whose hands were turning, for one, clockwise, for the other, counterclockwise. It wasn't Tilita at all; it was the girl from his dreams, the girl whom he loved, the only girl he loved. Zan Fadron was a very mixed up ool.

His musing brought the promoter a notion of tying a message to one of these birds and communicating with the outside world. If he should send numbers of these messages out year after year, surely some one would salvage one and learn the strange secret of Botomatl. Tilita moved as if conscious that their two thought currents had separated one from the other. She sat up, drew a little way from Zan Fadron, blinked her eyes and smiled at him as if aroused from a deep sleep. They began talking of their marriage. The girl told Zan Fadron of the wedding ceremony in Botomatl. When they were married, Zan Fadron would have to run after her and catch her against the combined efforts of all her kinspeople.

"All of them?"

"Oh, yes," she nodded brightly.

Tilita broke into the most decorative laughter.

"Indeed they will! Oh, it's exciting! You'll get knocks with sticks and stones; you'll be tripped."

Then she noticed his lengthening face and comforted him. "Oh, it will make no difference to you, darling. You will feel nothing. No groom does. Once a man came out with his head all bloody, but he felt nothing at all, absolutely nothing. He said he felt nothing at all, and you are so tall and strong." Tilita evidently anticipated a great social triumph.

But unfortunately, nature had bestowed upon Zan Fadron the dignity of a Lapis-Lazulian. That was why he had succeeded so well in the Lapis Lazuli offices of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. He realized the respect due from one ool to another. Temperamentally he was akin to the inhabitants of the capital city of Zasp, who never touch each other even in crowded streets. Now the thought of marriage with this orchid of a girl in the hurly burly of football-like ritual game utterly dismayed the caravan agent. He sat looking at her.

How was he going to marry her when he loved another? He had heard that in arranged marriages people often marry without love. Yes, one could marry without love. Or did he love another? Did a dream girl count as being a real person? His mind's eye looked at his dream girl; his real eyes looked at his jungle girl.

"Can't we live together without that, Tilita, somehow?"

The jungle girl's eyes widened. A slow crimson flooded her face and throat. "Live together without being married?" she gasped.

She made a movement, evidently about to jump up and run away. Zan Fadron reached for her with a sharp fear of loss. She was as offended as a Lapis-Lazulian girl at an improper proposal.

"Wait, wait, hold on, it's all right; any sort of marriage, slapstick, or grand opera... ."

"Then what made you say... ." began Tilita about to weep.

The promoter was afraid now even to criticize the form. "Oh, I... of course I didn't mean... ."

The girl searched his face and at last asked slowly. "Perhaps Gentlevir Thovas Tho will not allow you to marry me?"

The promoter broke into unaccustomed expletives. Thovas Tho had nothing to do with him. Nothing whatever. Thovas Tho was simply a fellow traveler and a fanatic and a fool.

"But don't you pay him?"

"No, no, that was a sort of joke."

Just a little joke to put her in a good humor. When they were married, and living in a tree, she would have to watch these little bursts of wit and take no offense. He was quite a wag, in his way. In saying all this Zan Fadron was under the impression he was steering away from dangerous ground into the broad safe highway of humor. Tilita sat nodding faintly. At last she asked: "But doesn't his Gods forbid our marriage?"

Zan Fadron broke off his discourse on humor. He thought over the girl's question. He really didn't know whether the Catechism forbade his marriage with Tilita or not. He supposed Thovas Tho was right. The fellow seemed to know a lot about the Book.

"Why, perhaps it does, Tilita, but... ."

"Aren't his Gods your Gods?"

For some time the promoter sat considering how to answer her. He did not want to tell her of his fundamental lack of all religious faith; that God was to him a mere apprehension of a Something behind this cinema of existence, and that he felt this only occasionally; the greater part of the time he sensed only vacuity. It was no faith at all. It held no concrete creed. It was merely a vague emotion directed toward nothing.

But Zan Fadron was far from admitting such nihilism to Tilita. The Artist in him loved a pretty faith in a woman. In other words, the Artist wanted the woman to have a religion. Somehow it harmonized with a woman's affection and sweetness

like a flower in her hair. He looked upon an agnostic woman as he did upon the bearded lady. It made no difference to him what faith they confessed: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Muhammadanism, the pretty ancestor worship of Shintoism, the Church of the Forerunner, any of various zenoc religions, any of the new faiths that have sprung up in the Zasp-Quelsian sphere of influence, or the Botomatl worship of the Stars; anything with a lilt to it.

When Tilita repeated her question he came to himself with a little start. "To tell you the truth. Tilita," he said by way of preface to his divarication, "in the spaceport of Lapis Lazuli, where I live, the women attend to, er, believing in God and, er, all that sort of thing. It's our city's custom."

The girl stared at him in amazement.

"The women!"

"Yes, the men, of course... back 'em up in it, and, ah, pay the bills... ."

Tilita was amazed at such a custom. She leaned forward and sank her chin in the corolla of her fingers. In this pretty attitude she thought it over, staring away through her high-beam—soaked jungle. "I wish it were that way in Botomatl," she mused wistfully, "then we women would keep all our babies."

She was so alluring, sitting thus, musing on her religion, and on their children yet to be, that a great melting filled Zan Fadron. He was constrained to fondle her again. He felt that he understood her perfectly.

CHAPTER 13

Neither the Darkoid Miner, Vosos Vos, nor his Chameleon suit's avatar, Zan Fadron, was, of course, other than completely oblivious to the fact that, Zaspian years later, a biography would be published of the life and times of Gentlevir, Darkoid Miner, and Reverend Thovas Tho. The biography would be about the real, flesh-and-blood, human being, Thovas Tho, as well as the avatar of him that the Blektofiran female Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, created from his stolen memories and his stolen persona. It would be considered a misfortune, indeed, almost a calamity for the province of biographical literature, that Zan Fadron's passion for the Outoolian girl estranged him from Thovas Tho. This estrangement unfitted Zan Fadron for being an unbiased source for the writing of a sympathetic, or even a veridical account of that remarkable man.

Besides the biography's author, many other writers would attempt to reconstruct Thovas Tho's amazing career in Botomatl. The Outools of Botomatl would be interviewed. Thovas Tho's letters to his wife, Ludia Faba, would be studied and analyzed. Every genre of journal, from the stridor of the Zaspian yellows to the basso profundo of the Quelsian quarterlies would devote fascicles to what may be termed the Thovas Tho myth.

But of Thovas Tho's inner self, much would be made from the source of Zan

Fadron's harsh and unsympathetic glimpses. That so much of the very story of Thovas Tho's greatness should be confided to such an adverse source, would be the final touch of irony in Thovas Tho's life and the avatar's pseudolife. Of the beginnings of Thovas Tho's bold undertaking, Zan Fadron knew or felt nothing more than it disturbed his morning sleep in the paddlewood.

He was annoyed by the revivalistic hymns; and during the last days of the promoter's cotenancy with the revivalist Thovas Tho's sunrise prayer-meetings forced Zan Fadron to abandon late morning hours in his hammock. The promoter formed the unwilling habit of rising betimes. Then he would walk down to the Hopeless arbol-de-vaca forest where he would meet Tilita. The two would then spend the remainder of the day in agreeable courtship, and in liming birds and starting them with messages to civilization begging rescue.

One morning curiosity sent Zan Fadron down to one of the meetings to see what Thovas Tho and his converts were doing. The sunrise services were held under a Hopeless banyan not far from the Hopeless paddlewood. Zan Fadron joined the little congregation and sat down on one of the rude seats that had been extemporized between the boles. Some dozen Outools were there, and Thovas Tho stood on a dais with a pulpit beside him.

The whole service was as near a reproduction of the ordinary sunrise meeting as Thovas Tho could contrive. The colporteur had chosen a "topic" and cognate texts. Solgat Sol translated these into the local Outoolian dialect from Thovas Tho's shocking Fligsidian which he had translated from the original Forerunners' tongue. After all this twisting through three languages, the new converts would arise and repeat their memory verses. Zan Fadron, who possessed exceptional linguistic facility, could follow the texts through all their metamorphoses, and he heard some extraordinary renderings of the Forerunner's version, of which Zan Fadron had a copy in his hand.

Thovas Tho himself, standing on his dais, sweated under this mental struggle. Only his black oily hair remained unruffled. The left half and top of his hair had an ebony finish; over his right eye and ear, it broke into a gleaming scroll of large polished curls, greatly aided by a cowlick over the right temple. It was the tonsure of a rustic, Fligsidian, arbiter's elegantorium, and Zan Fadron was always amazed to see such hair on such an indomitable fellow.

Prolonged preaching was visibly tiring to Thovas Tho. During the services, three transverse wrinkles in the thick skin of Thovas Tho's forehead filled with sweat. Under two-beam, this reflected the foliage of the banyan above and drew three bright green streaks above and parallel with his eye brows. The colporteur exhorted his hearers to quit their sins and to give their hearts to the Forerunner Gods. He talked of the Forerunner God's desires, preferences, and predilections with convincing intimacy. He had the power of a prestidigitator to visualize the

impalpable.

His absolute conviction that there were powers above him, looking down on him, with whom he was in immediate, personal touch, at last produced an illusion of reality even in Zan Fadron. The promoter received a very concrete impression that up in the banyan above them sat a few very irascible old Forerunner Gentlehomoes who watched the worshipers closely, reading their thoughts, and who were on the watch for their every little fault which they meant to punish terrifically.

At the conclusion of the address, Thovas Tho called upon his hearers to testify to the experiences through which they had passed in gaining salvation for their souls, or, as Thovas Tho expressed it, how did they know they had made their calling and election sure? They arose one at a time. Some had seen visions; others had dreamed dreams. One fisherman avouched that a fish in his net had spoken to him. Thovas Tho greeted each new testimonial with fervent ejaculation and vigorous shakes of the hand. In the midst of these felicitations, a middle-aged Outool arose and said that his wife would soon bear him a baby, his eighth child. He wanted to know what he should do in order that it should go to Forerunner Heaven instead of to the Stars.

Thovas Tho advised him to bring it to the banyan for Forerunner baptism.

"Then what must I do with it, Brothool Thovas Tho?"

"Train it to serve the Forerunner Gods and keep Their commandments."

The Outool, whose name was Chacala, seemed astonished.

"Train it here in Botomatl?"

"Certainly!"

"My eighth child?"

"The Forerunner Gods number the hairs of your head, Brothool Chacala," said Thovas Tho, "but I never heard of them numbering an ool's children, or caring what number it was. They love 'em all."

Chacala sprang up with a glowing face. "Then I may keep my child! Praise the Forerunner Gods! You will excuse me, Brothool Thovas Tho. I must hurry to my wife! She may be delivered of a boy while I sit here talking! Praise the Forerunner Lords!"

Then to Zan Fadron's amazement, Chacala turned and ran from the banyan, going northward toward the lake.

Chacala's explosiveness ended the meeting. The colporteur and Solgat Sol joined Zan Fadron and walked with him out of the banyan. Thovas Tho said Solgat Sol had just joined his congregation and was doing great work as an interpreter. He was anxious that Zan Fadron should be reconciled to Solgat Sol in order to aid the muleteer in his religious life within the teachings of the Church of the Forerun-

ner. The colporteur interlarded this with many quotations such as how good it is for brothools to dwell together in unity, blessed is the one first to forgive, et cetera.

So accordingly the two men shook hands and became friends. The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil began an apology for his violence on Tilita. "My dear Brothool Zan Fadron, as a new member of the Church of the Forerunner, awakened to a new sense of duty, I crave your pardon for... ."

Zan Fadron assured him he had it.

"And the pardon of the dear gentlefem... ."

He had that, too; Zan Fadron granted it.

"Certainly the devil of temptation is wrapped up in a woman, Brothool Zan Fadron," moralized Solgat Sol.

Zan Fadron agreed briefly.

"You have felt it, Brothool Zan Fadron, you understand."

The promoter made no reply.

"So you can excuse me more readily if I went beside myself. Merciless Void! I swear to you, my Brothool, the mere memory of it..." He gave a little shiver, checked himself, and swallowed. "But that is all over now, put behind me by the help of the Blessed Forerunner Lords."

"Redeemers," prompted Thovas Tho.

"Yes, yes," nodded Solgat Sol, "two Darkools... you two cold Darkools."

"Amen," drawled Thovas Tho, fervently. "The Forerunner Gods have taken away your filthy lusts, Brothool Solgat Sol."

"That's all over now; let's drop it," suggested Zan Fadron.

"Yes it's all over now. Now I spend my time on my knees, praying... praying... ." He fell to shivering violently. "Ugh, Brothool Zan Fadron, it's cold work, I tell you, on your knees praying to the Blessed Forerunner Gods when you know another ool holds your beloved in his arms, kissing, hugging, fondling, and she kissing back. Merciless Void! It's chilly, chilly work!" Solgat Sol's teeth chattered even in the warm climate of the crater.

"You'll have to forgive him," soothed Thovas Tho, "he's been havin' troublin' dreams like us two."

"What type of dreams?" enquired Zan Fadron, very interested.

Thovas Tho answered: "He keeps dreamin' that he's a woman trapped in man's body. These dreams have really been disturbin' him, I reckon."

The men walked on in silence for a few paces, then Zan Fadron said, to fill the void: "Thovas Tho, you are having nice weather for your meetings."

The colporteur was beginning to thank the Forerunner Lords for the weather when Solgat Sol interrupted.

"My dear Brothool Zan Fadron, may I ask as a friend, when you are going to marry Tilita, or... do you mean to marry her at all? Is what Gentlevir Thovas Tho says true; that you love not Tilita, but another?"

A slight perspiration broke out on the promoter's face. He went on resolutely with his conversation with Thovas Tho. "However, Thovas Tho, you must look out for a bit of bad weather. I don't mean from the elements; I mean from the Botomatl priests."

"Because if, if you are not going to marry Tilita," shivered Solgat Sol, staring at the mold under their feet, "my dear Brothool Zan Fadron, I think it quite wrong... Merciless Void, I know it's quite wrong to be nuzzling her like that, quite wrong."

"Confound it!" cried Zan Fadron, wheeling on the muleteer. "Yes I'm going to marry Tilita... I asked you to drop the subject!"

"I, I didn't intend... ."

"But you do!"

"Pardon me."

"You are pardoned, but damn it, quit talking!"

Another silence ensued with Thovas Tho trudging along, staring at the promoter. "Brothool Zan Fadron! Brothool Zan Fadron, is it possible that you are going to form a sacred union with this idolatrous... ."

The promoter sweated that Solgat Sol had set Thovas Tho off on one of his endless harangues.

"Yes," he said briefly.

"After I read you the Catechism's blessed thirteenth... ."

"I have nothing to do with that Catechism verse. Never heard of it until you dug up a lot of insults and quoted it."

"Insults! Out of the Blessed Forerunner Gospel? Why, Brothool Zan Fadron, that is a book of sweetness and peace, of love and affection... .."

The promoter remained silent, scolding himself for ever going to Thovas Tho's meeting. He might have known it would lead to some unpleasantness. The colporteur walked on, studying the caravan agent with his expressionless eyes.

"Do you realize, Brothool Zan Fadron, that you are an adult man and she is a child? You are an older man than I am, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Maybe I am in years," agreed Zan Fadron with poor temper, "but what's age here in this tropical crater among this primitive people? An ool's as old as an ool feels."

"And while you are too old for her now," pursued Thovas Tho relentlessly, "do you realize, Brothool Zan Fadron, in a few years she'll be too old for you? Ools age much faster here in Botomatl than in Lapis Lazuli."

This last reasoning revived Zan Fadron's specter of old Prymoxl, a hopeless

ancient at twenty-six or thereabout. What would he do when this luscious girl fell into decay?

"Of course I've thought about it," frowned the promoter.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Marry her, I told you."

"And live with her, Brothool Zan Fadron, when she is old and flabby and wrinkled, like her mammy?"

The words set Zan Fadron to probing his own intentions, and he found unflattering connotations in their depths. He wanted to defend himself before Thovas Tho. An argument floated to the surface showing the inevitability of polygamy in tropical locales. He thought of the Zaspians and the polygamous code they accept, and of the Quelsians who did not. The whole question was a matter of geography, of where an ool lived. Now, he was very fond of Tilita, but old Prymoxl, if he could only get Tilita to Lapis Lazuli away from this heat. Then he realized that Thovas Tho could appreciate none of these arguments. He knew nothing of geography, of ethnology; a hardheaded bigoted rustic.

"Thovas Tho," he said. "I must decline to discuss so delicate a topic with any man."

The trio walked on in silence over the deep leaf mold toward the lake. Solgat Sol shivered occasionally under the other's night-vision illumination. Thovas Tho moved stolidly with his expressionless face. Zan Fadron was sweating. He was ashamed and sad, filled with that queer, bitter flavor of unfaithfulness in the midst of passion, of the sneer on the two faces of Time—clockwise and counterclockwise. Presently the colporteur drawled: "Brothool Zan Fadron, have you tried to lead her into the blessed fold?"

The question set off Solgat Sot into discordant laughter. "Yes, yes, Brothool Thovas Tho, he's been wrestling... ." He broke off shivering.

"No, I haven't," snapped the promoter.

"Why haven't you, Brothool?"

"Because, well, simply because I didn't want to."

"You don't want to!"

"No."

Thovas Tho stared.

"Do you want me and Brothool Solgat Sol to go and labor with her?"

"No!" yelled the promoter. "No, I don't! I want her just as she is. She has a pretty faith. It suits her!"

"Her faith suits her!" the colporteur broke into unwonted temper. "You say it suits her; it's graceful and pretty! That's while she's graceful and pretty!"

"Here, Thovas Tho, don't go too far!"

"But when she's wrinkled and old, it won't be so graceful and pretty," rushed on the revivalist angrily, "then you'll take up with a new girl, Gentlevir Zan Fadron! You know you will! I know you will! You ain't got no set principles about neither women nor the Forerunner Gods! You don't care what happens s'long as it panders to the filthy lusts of your... ."

A flush ran over Zan Fadron. "Thovas Tho, you say another word... ."

"I'll say this," drawled Thovas Tho, grimly, "I'm going to do what I can for the pore child's salvation. I don't believe you believe she's got a soul!"

"Confound you, I don't know and I don't care!" cried Zan Fadron beside himself. "She'll never pay any attention to you! She despises you already!"

A look of horror came over Thovas Tho's face. "Gentlesap Zan Fadron, I do believe you're an Anti-Forerunner! Blessed Forerunner Lords, I do believe you are! That Beast that sets on the hill with the blood of saints dripping from its jaws! You are Fecktagon! You're the Brute with Three Horns! You'll swoller this girl. Forerunner Gods ha' mercy! I'll pray to the Forerunner Gods to rescue her from you! Oh, merciful Forerunner Lords!" The colporteur's earnestness was terrific, his face grayish. He turned from Zan Fadron as if from contamination, and veered northwest to circle around the lake to his missionary field. Solgat Sol followed his teacher, shivering.

The promoter continued to the Hopeless arbol-de-vaca forest furiously angry. The colporteur had insulted him with fantastic insults, and yet, strangely enough, Zan Fadron found himself in a defensive mood. Thovas Tho's reference to the Beast, and Fecktagon, troubled Zan Fadron. They were disturbing anathemas. Zan Fadron had never attended a miner's revival in the mines of the darkoid Fligsid. He was not aware what a treasury of maledictions the rustic Church of the Forerunner evangelist heaps upon the slightest object of his disapproval. Besides being unnerved at Thovas Tho's vituperation, Zan Fadron thought twice as to what effect the colporteur's prayers might have on the girl. Experience had taught him that the colporteur did not pray in vain. Certainly all the answers Thovas Tho had received were purely by chance, but it was chance grown into a sort of habit.

The thought of losing Tilita went through Zan Fadron's midriff with a sort of spasm of pain. He began to sweat. He was so agitated that he hurried on down to the Hopeless cow-tree forest, peering through the boles long before he could possibly have seen her.

His anxiety mounted as each empty aisle stretched itself before his eyes. At last, with very real relief, he saw her standing near the tapped trees, drawing the milk into calabashes. She was leaning this way and that, peering through the forest for him, because he was overdue. Zan Fadron waved and shouted at her. So she had not been caught up in a chariot of fire, or a whirlwind, or translated away. He hurried up and kissed her far more fervently than usual. He asked with a cer-

tain concern if she were feeling well. Under the subterfuge of caressing her hand, he secretly felt her pulse.

It was going a trifle fast, but under his extra gusto of caressing, that was natural. With his anxiety appeased, the promoter made himself comfortable and sat watching the girl drive an obsidian chisel into the cow-trees, then insert a joint of cane and catch a tiny rill of vaca sap. The liquid would flow for ten or twelve minutes and then dribble out. Tilita might have had a dozen canes dripping at once, but she contented herself with one. She was as unhurried in her work as the movements of the stars in the sky.

Her deliberation always spread a certain impatience through the Darkool from Lapis Lazuli. Yet, somehow, it was provocative, too. As he watched her, his own nervous force always concentrated itself in a desire to sweep her into vehemence. Usually after an hour or so of such observation, her dilatoriness goaded him into one of those outbursts of fondling that occur with a certain regularity among lovers, and are based, no doubt, upon some nervous periodicity.

Zan Fadron was in the midst of one of these ebullitions; he had just lifted Tilita in his arms when he glimpsed the figure of a man at some distance, half hidden behind a cow-tree. The promoter eased his sweetheart to the ground, after the manner of dignified men when discovered in an unconventionality. He stood with one arm, consciously — one might almost say conscientiously— around her waist, because not to touch her at all would admit a fault. The newcomer proved to be Solgat Sol. Whether he had been spying or simply passing by, Zan Fadron could not be sure. However, the tone of Solgat Sol's conversation a little while before suggested the former.

A certain woodenness seized all three as Solgat Sol passed by. To touch Tilita's waist became an effort. Likewise it was clear by the way the Horgadilian walked that he wanted to stop and say something, but he could find no leg to stop on. He seemed bound to be carried past by dint of his own mechanism.

Then the ludicrous quality of the situation came, to Zan Fadron's relief. Certain lines from a play many thousands of years old came to mind. He had seen the play performed in a theater next to Tamen Kun Park in Lapis Lazuli. It was a play called "Hamlet:" "...where be your jibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment?... quite chop-fallen... ." Then the absurdity of treating like this an ool who had goaded one of his grimposauri across the Sedna Mountains thawed out Zan Fadron. He called: "I thought you were going around the lake with Thovas Tho, Solgat Sol."

The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil whirled around and went through a great show of having seen them for the first time.

"Ah, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron, and the Gentlefem, too!"

Zan Fadron removed his arm with a certain sense of relief.

"I was just thinking of you," proceeded Solgat Sol, continuing his air of discovery. "I was just thinking of you, Gentlevir. I wanted to say, I do not follow my dear Brothool Thovas Tho in condemning you."

"That's very good of you, Solgat Sol."

"Indeed. It is a matter of principle with me, Gentlevir. Between ourselves religion is a lonesome thing. I don't blame you at all." All this while he had kept his eyes painstakingly off Tilita. Now he glanced at her, shivered and forgot what he meant to say, for he repeated emptily. "I don't blame anyone for... for anything."

"Are you going to assist Thovas Tho in his work?" enquired the caravan agent to help him out of this difficulty.

"N-no, Gentlehomo. I, er, I am working on, I'm working on a fishing boat now, that's how I came to be passing by here. I'm working on a fishing boat now." He was evidently manufacturing the explanation of his presence out of thin air.

"So you are going to fish?"

"Yes."

"Where is your boat?"

Solgat Sol nodded vaguely up the lake.

"Are you building it yourself?"

"Yes."

The situation was beginning to develop into a comedy.

"I'd like to see it."

Solgat Sol spread a deprecating hand. "Oh, it, it's an ordinary boat."

"Just to see what sort of a boat you could make. Would you like a look, too, Tilita?"

The girl was curious at once to see Solgat Sol's boat. Both of them started toward the muleteer.

"It's a long way through the Stars, Gentlefem," warned the saddle-colored man uncomfortably.

Zan Fadron bit his lip. He was not sure whether the girl saw the joke or not.

"Oh, Tilita likes the Stars, she happily soaks up starshine."

Solgat Sol shuddered. "I am complimented if the Gentlefem cares to see my poor boat."

He saw they were going to follow him and he moved vaguely off up the sand. The promoter followed his rival with unsmiling mirth. Then, he was still more amused at Solgat Sol's plan to get out of the difficulty. The Horgadilian proceeded straight up the shoreline through the starshine and the sand. Necessarily they would find a boat sooner or later. Presently they did come in sight of something far away on the sand. After a little while Solgat Sol called over his shoulder: "I was

just revamping an old bolsa Gentlehomoes.''

When they reached it, sure enough, there was an old boat for which someone was making a sort of reed cover. Solgat Sol's eyes had been better than Zan Fadron's. The promoter looked at it idly. ''What are you going to do with such a cover, Solgat Sol?''

Solgat Sol looked at the cover. ''It will keep in the fish, Gentlevir.''

''Keep in the fish!''

''And the waves out, in a storm, Gentlesap.''

Zan Fadron could hardly remain sober. ''If the storms get too bad, Solgat Sol,'' he said gravely, ''I believe I would row to the bank if I were you. How do you weave it?''

The Horgadilian sat down among the bundles of Hopeless reeds, and cords of Hopeless nipa palms, and began bundling them into the long strakes of which the queer top was composed. He did exceedingly well at it for a first attempt. The promoter complimented the muleteer's work and got away in time to keep from laughing and spoiling the farce. As he walked back down the beach, he looked back over his shoulder once or twice. As far as he could see, Solgat Sol was still seated in the sand, twisting somebody's reeds and cordage, keeping up his pretense. The promoter asked his companion how fishermen ever used a top to a bolsa. Tilita had never heard of a bolsa having a top. When they were well away, Zan Fadron explained the joke to his companion. To Zan Fadron's surprise she seemed not at all amused.

''Yes, I saw it was not his bolsa,'' she answered gravely; and a little later, ''He can't help creeping after me, primo; he told me so himself,'' she said, glancing back at the solitary figure in the long strand of yellow sand swinging around the lake. After that, the incident somehow lost zest in Zan Fadron's eyes. Apparently he had overrated its humor.

Zan Fadron and the Botomatlian, Outoolian girl did not stop at the cow-trees, but continued down the lake to the temple of the Stars. The lake itself narrowed to a stream in its eastern part, flowed toward the enormous facade, then turned and swept north and eventually fell into some subterranean cavity in the side of the crater.

It was in the long ''f-shaped'' neck of land thus cut off that Zan Fadron and Tilita had strung their limed cords for birds. The place was a perfect aviary, perhaps because the water cut off, to some extent, vermin and small animals that prey on nestlings. It was a full three miles to their trapping grounds and the lovers followed the edge of the forest to escape some of the difficulties of jungle trekking. As they wound in and out, they caught full glimpses, and partial glimpses of the enormous facade of the teocalla. In the gentle white light of the two-beamed meridian, the great alto relief appeared harsh, almost forbidding.

When they were within perhaps a mile of the temple, the female Darkool paused and stared through the dancing starbeams of her night-vision, retinal apparati, which had been implanted at birth by Botomatlian priests. Then, she pointed excitedly, directing Zan Fadron's eyes. After some blinking, the promoter made out what appeared to be a little string of ants crawling out of the main entrance. Naturally, they were priests, quite a band of them. Their almost imperceptible line of march across the facade renewed the caravan agent's shock at its prodigious reach.

Tilita was quite excited and said: "Come, let's hurry down and see whose it is!"

"Whose what is?"

"Baby."

"Those things aren't babies, they are priests!"

"Certainly they aren't babies, certainly." She tried to keep from laughing, colored slightly, then controlled herself and said very sedately. "A new baby has come to Botomatl. I wonder who its mother is?" She stared a moment longer with the engrossed eyes of a woman over the thrill of a new life; then suddenly she seized Zan Fadron's arm, snuggled a moment to his side, and next instant went skipping down the beach toward the temple.

The promoter was put to it to keep up with the nymph. Within fifty yards he began to weary. "Hold on," he panted, "the baby's parentage will keep. I fancy it's Chacala's."

Tilita gave him a backward nod, and related. "Oh, yes, I'm sure it's Chacala's and old Xauxa's."

"Old Xauxa's?"

"Yes, old Xauxa's," chirped the girl. "She must be twenty-two or maybe twenty-three."

Zan Fadron slowed down abruptly. "Here," he said in a different voice. "There's no use running." He walked deliberately to the margin of the sand where the Hopeless grass kept his feet from sinking into its depths.

Tilita slowed up obediently and joined him. "Why, what's the matter?" she asked, looking curiously into his face.

"Oh nothing, nothing at all." He made a little gesture and stood looking with a kind of ache at this brief voluptuousness before him. The child—the girl—the young woman—whatever she was, became grave, and then concerned.

"Primo," she divined, with a little wrinkle of her brows. "Primo, is, is it, I, Don't you love me?"

The man bent over her in a kind of anguish. He pressed his mouth to her lips. The fragrance of the cow-tree milk surrounded him. She lifted herself to him and

held him with extraordinary passion, with thoughts of giving birth to his and her beautiful baby drumming in her heart.

It was rather a bizarre performance, such a flux of erotic despair in the passion-furnace of starshine. The female Outool pursued the ool's unhappiness with a hundred hurried questions. What was there about her that made him sad? Was she not beautiful? Her ahveenoh (grandmother), who was a fourth Non-Botomatlian, was beautiful. She was very like her ahveenoh. They talked on about the ahveenoh. When asked how she knew, the girl said she could see her ahveenoh any day that her beautiful ahveenoh did not journey through the sky in the mansions of the Stars.

"You can still see her?" queried the promoter curiously.

"Oh, yes, any one can. There is a little crevice in the temple. When a certain Star or Constellation passes through the teocalla at sundown, perhaps my ahveenoh may get out of the Star and remain for a day in the temple." Her use of the term "sundown" here was with the exact same connotation for it as all known Darkools have used for centuries. To a Darkool, "sundown" means nineteen hundred hours (seven o'clock in the evening). Since a darkoid has no sun, the term "sundown" to a Darkool is metaphorical, historical, medicinal, and traditional, but certainly not literal.

To hear her talk of her grandmother in this fashion almost brought a smile to Zan Fadron's face. Such a quaint notion pleased Zan Fadron. He glanced up to see what Constellations were visible at the moment. When he took down his eyes, readjustment of his night-vision, retinal apparati caused dark splotches to swarm over the landscape.

"Do you suppose she is in the temple today?"

"Had she known we wanted to see her she would have remained in Botomatl," assured Tilita, also looking up at the Stars.

Zan Fadron smiled at such an easy loophole. "Of course. If she isn't in the temple, she didn't know."

"But if we want to see her she will know. Dwellers in the Stars know all we do and think," pronounced the female Darkool reverently.

This closed the loophole. "Then she will be there?"

"If we want to see her and ask her blessing."

At Zan Fadron's desire they decided to see the grandmother, and set out with a renewed object for the teocalla.

They walked quickly, and by the time the Constellation, Poised Knight, had declined into the west, they were walking across the vast approach to the temple. This was a pavement that fronted the temple like the piazzas before Zaspian cathedrals. It was a clearway paved with hexagonal blocks of tufa and fronted some

three quarters of a mile of vast pilasters. Certain routes were worn in the spread of pavement where endless feet had tramped its breadth. Of these human traces worn in stone, the deepest path led to the main entrance; two more approached the two side entrances; and one pursued its way straight across the field of masonry.

Such endless ashlar work, such worn footways connoted a once vast population in Botomatl. The people gathered together in its bowl must be but a remnant of a human ant-like nest that wrought such labors. Whither had they gone? It was the query of the ancient Terran sphinx. The vast facade was utterly deserted. The priests who had gone forth left no tenders. Zan Fadron walked on up through the heat to the great carved structure. The bases of the main pilasters were some thirty feet in diameter, but they arose to such heights they were drawn out to airiness. Looking up, Zan Fadron saw the ancient architect had mastered some new principle of proportion that prevented the facade from appearing to lean outward.

The whole structure vibrated with heat. The crowns of the columns far above the piazza were blurred. Heat filled Zan Fadron's clothes. Sweat stung his eyes and trickled down his skin like insects. Along the outer edge of the piazza flowed the stream from the lake. North of the long pavement, a slender triangle of jungle set in between the river and the cliffs and continued to the point where the stream debouched into the palisades. From the pavement before the temple, they could just hear the faint murmur of its violence.

When Tilita passed the northern entrance of the teocalla, she diverged from the beaten path toward the jungle and turned to a little fault in the great facade. It was so well masked by an accident of the gigantic carving, that Zan Fadron never would have observed the aperture. It was evidently the result of some modern earthquake and was not designed by the sculptor because the vertical carvings on the exterior did not correspond exactly with the crack. The swell of the scroll on the capital of one of the columns had been split in two. The solid stone radiated tangible heat when Zan Fadron approached it.

"Now, if my ahveenoh has not gone up to heaven with the Stars," began Tilita, placing her face in the aperture. A moment later: "No, there she is." She drew back and gave place to Zan Fadron. He placed his hands on two great projections of sculpture and peered into a crack through solid stone, some twenty feet thick.

He switched between his three night-vision modes to get optimal visibility, and then, as soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the softened illumination, he saw he was looking into a chamber filled with many-colored lights. He sensed the color value of the light by the wonder of the nude statue of a woman that knelt in direct line with the aperture. A dozen subtle reflections from the statue bespoke the colorful illumination. Its blanched surface was touched with pinkish, mauve and pavonine tints.

This remarkable beauty of contour held Zan Fadron. The hair of the statue was done with actual human hair, after the fashion of the un-Hellenized Zaspians. The lips were scarlet. The eyes seemed to be inset of dark stones. Even a faint pilosity was suggested under the uplifted arms. In short, the sculptor of this kneeling Venus lapsed from splendid inspiration into over-detail. Zan Fadron was just regretting this slight disfigurement of a genuine triumph in sculpture when the eyelids of the statue seemed to close. Zan Fadron leaned forward with a slack jaw. He turned and encountered Tilita's face almost touching his.

"My God!" he aspirated. "She's alive!"

The girl gave a little restrained laugh, for she was in a holy place.

"Certainly. She is my ahveenoh."

Zan Fadron looked back. The face of the statue was as like Tilita's as a reflection, except it was paler.

While the promoter was looking he saw the eyes were open again.

CHAPTER 14

Although a marionette would have been of much service to the priests in the teocalla, to lend an aura of reality to the fantastic faith of the star-worshipers, two reasons convinced Zan Fadron the figure was a woman. The caravan agent did not believe that any sculptor in Botomatl could handle the human figure with such mastery; and last, a school that could produce such art would condemn the vast baroque facade in which it was housed. The two were incompatible. The figure was a woman. No doubt she knelt in some sort of trance. Primitive peoples are often skilled in such occultism: the fakirs of the darkoid Fligsid; the snake-dancers of the darkoid Horgadil. He turned to the female Darkool: "How long has your ahveenoh been like that, Tilita?"

"Ever since my mother was a tiny baby. Her husband, my grandfather, was drowned in the lake, so my ahveenoh joined her lord in the Stars." She paused, then added. "My grandmother has thirty-nine years now; sixteen in the Stars."

The number registered on Zan Fadron with odd emphasis. The Venus in the teocalla was, or had she lived, would have been, precisely thirty years older than his own age. By some means it had been possible to preserve a beauty such as Tilita possessed even in Botomatl. The two lovers were now walking up the jungle in the angle between the river and the cliffs. The sound of rushing water was so pronounced as to make conversation difficult. In the jungle were their bird snares, and Tilita ran before to examine each one before Zan Fadron reached it. One had caught a bird, a tanager. The female Outool beckoned gaily for Zan Fadron to come and hold it while she tied on a message to the outer world.

She did it gaily, as a sort of game, because Botomatl was not a prison, but a universe to her who knew nothing else.

The two worked their way through the jungle to the bank of the river where it debouched into the cliff. The stream was about forty yards wide at the place of its disappearance. The volume of water rushed down its stony bed, struck the opposing wall, piled up, was deflected in a great whorl back on itself, then spun around a hole in the center of the flood and vanished with a gigantic sucking sound.

The whirlpool stirred a cool breeze on the sultriest days. The green Hopeless fronds and Hopeless flowers along its banks waved in a perpetual blast. But what always held and amazed Zan Fadron was the hole in the maelstrom. From the shore, it seemed a yard or two in width. It swung here and there in the wheeling waters. Its glassy funnel twisted and bent with that strange sucking sound that ranged from a ground bass to a shrill cacophony. Once every hour or so the hole would close with a sort of gulp; would ensue a confused roaring, a spouting, a coughing up of tons of water as if some monster were suffocating. After some minute or two of this confusion, the hole would suck open again and take up its spin.

All water seems alive, but the debouchment of the Botomatl river with its sucking, gasping, swallowing and renewed sucking gave the most ferocious impression that Zan Fadron had ever observed. While Zan Fadron watched the green whorl, another bird was entangled on one of the limed cords. Tilita saw it and hurried to get it before it smeared its wings. Presently she came pushing back through the Hopeless undergrowth with some sort of goldfinch in her hands. She held it aloft jubilantly for Zan Fadron to admire its bright orange body and black wings. She put the bird in his hands to hold while she bound the message to its leg. Tilita had a child's instinct for divination. Now, to test the fate of the message, she tossed it into the air to see what direction it would take. This infallibly showed what course the bird would fly. Zan Fadron entered into her little superstition and entertained her by telling her that the spaceport Lapis Lazuli would be found by the bird in that direction. This always led to a description of caravans, starshlps, buildings, theaters, zenoc rodeos; thus in a way, every message Tilita sent forth carried her fancy on wonderful journeys.

This time the bit of paper danced in the air and sailed toward the brink of the whirlpool. The girl darted to its rescue. She leaned so far out that Zan Fadron was frightened. The paper eluded her, went over a little bank of stone down to the very water's edge. Tilita was after it instantly, with a girl's limberness. She was out of sight under the bank for only an instant when Zan Fadron heard her shriek above the suck of the maelstrom.

The male Darkool leaped to the bank and looked over. To his relief, he saw the girl just beneath him. She was apparently in no danger at all, but was stooping and staring into the water.

"Blessed Void, Tilita, what a turn you gave me! What is it?"

At his voice, the girl suddenly began shrieking, flew up the bank with

monkeyish agility, and landed in Zan Fadron's arms. She cuddled there, still screaming and staring back at whatever had frightened her. The promoter received her with the immense compassion of a lover. He began that rapturous soothing and petting which a man lavishes upon his sweetheart, but which changes so unaccountably to sarcasm when the same trait appears in his wife.

"Is it a snake?" He moved toward the river peering down.

The Darkoolian female stayed close to him, shivering and half crying and staring backward. "I... it's a man," she gasped at last.

At the same moment Zan Fadron saw it for himself. In the edge of the whirlpool floated a man. His head doddled and his legs waved idly in the current, but his arms were bound tightly to his side by many wrappings of cord. A loose loop of this cord had tangled in some roots and moored the body. For a moment longer Zan Fadron's thoughts continued on the man, then switched to the girl: "It's just a drowned man, sweetheart. Don't be frightened. He can't hurt you."

"I... it's Chaca-Ch-Chacala!" Then the female Outool sobbed irrepressibly.

Zan Fadron looked again. Sure enough it was the Outool who had thanked the Forerunner Gods so joyously that morning that he might rear his child in Botomatl. The cord that anchored him to the roots was the same sort of gleaming rope that Jagala, the priest, unwound from the body of the dead vicuna. It was what had drawn Zan Fadron's dead grimposauri on top of the rim; it was what Obmo Eno had preserved as a souvenir of his ghastly adventure in the Sekrio Vampiro.

This slow accumulation of horrors struck at Zan Fadron's nerves. He loosed the girl and stood looking down at the drowned man with a sort of tickling in his chest, throat and the palms of his hands. He caught hold of a wild Hopeless lemon bush and lowered himself a little unsteadily to the water's edge. He drew in the cadaver by a loop. He knew quite well what he would see before he pulled it from the water. But as he lifted the body, a pressure on its stomach crushed it in like an empty sack. Zan Fadron had forgotten that, and now he loosed it with a violent shudder. The corpse dropped half in and half out of the whirlpool.

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent stood with a shaken heart. He stooped and washed his hands. The mystery that had formed over his party on the rim of Botomatl seemed weaving itself about them. Its inscrutability appalled him. It seemed to Zan Fadron that the very brilliancy of the two-beamed starshine wove a shining web to veil some murderous power. He looked down at the ill-starred Chacala, at the ashen corpse.

At that moment the whirlpool choked, and regurgitated with a roar. Tons of water leaped up and flowed bankward. It caught Zan Fadron and threw him to his knees. Tilita cried out and reached down to help him up the bank. Chacala's body went with the ebb. The vortex opened again with its endless sucking. The body spun about the green funnel, spun about, drawing closer, and at last dived down-

ward and disappeared, a dim greenish shadow with flying legs, as if some swimmer were stroking downward into the maelstrom, bent on self destruction. The goldfinch was gone; whether Zan Fadron accidentally loosed it, or squeezed it to death in his excitement, he never knew.

The death, the murder of Chacala, brought Zan Fadron a presentiment of some wide disturbance in Botomatl, and somehow, the promoter sensed that the colporteur was in the midst of it. Zan Fadron and Tilita set out homeward in an effort to learn more about the tragedy that shocked them. As the two entered the northern edge of the great plaza fronting the teocalla, the promoter was not surprised to see a distant figure running in from the southern boundary of the piazza toward the main entrance. At such a distance he could tell nothing about who it was; perhaps a priest hurrying to the temple for aid in some new assassination.

Both the man and the girl hurried forward past the series of immense pilasters when Zan Fadron saw that the person hurrying in from the south was a woman, an old woman. The promoter guessed it to be Xauxa, Chacala's wife. She ran with the labor of gravid women; her effort must have inflicted severe punishment. Apparently she meant to run straight into the temple, and now as she came, Zan Fadron could hear her calling the names of the priests in a desperate voice: "Gogoma! Jagala! Quiz-Quiz! Caxas!"

With his quick sympathy, Zan Fadron hurried down, with some hope of relieving the old woman's trouble or despair, when Tilita gave a gasp and cried out: "It's my mother! Oh, what has happened? Perhaps the baby... ." She went flying down the vast tufa pavement screaming: "Mommy! Mommy! What has happened? Mommy!"

Zan Fadron followed running. As he drew near the entrance of the teocalla, he saw Gogoma standing in the archway. The entrance and facade were so huge the priest was diminished to a mere brown blob guarding the passage.

"What is it, Prymoxl?" he called in the short-breathed voice of the exceedingly obese.

"My babies!" screamed the old crone. "Where are my babies, Gogoma? What have you done with my babies?"

As Zan Fadron hurried toward the entrance to aid his future mother-in-law, Gogoma's brown spot swelled to a vast dripping body.

"Your babies are in the Stars, Prymoxl."

"My babies are dead! They are dead!" shrieked the crone. "You killed them! You!" She shrieked and rushed at him with curved fingers.

The fat man put out the bulk of his arm with unshaken dignity and allowed her to carom against it. It was shocking, the collision between the ancient crone and the behemoth. Both were fairly helpless.

"Be quiet, Prymoxl. Why do you come screaming to the temple that your chil-

dren are dead? Why?''

''The man Thovas Tho swore it! He struck the bark of my baobab and it caught fire!''

Gogoma widened his slit-like eyes and swung his bulk a little forward to stare at the virago. ''He struck fire? With his hand!''

''Oh, yes, yes, yes!'' The old woman seemed to grow weak. ''Fire spurts from his hand! That proves he told the truth! My babies are dead, my little babies are dead.'' Suddenly the old woman's wrinkled face broke into a twisting; her flabby breasts heaved to a sort of choking; her old eyes had no tears. It was the hideous sobbing of the aged. Her very repulsiveness touched Zan Fadron. He took the creature by the arms.

''Hush, Prymoxl. You can't believe Thovas Tho! There is nothing to what he tells you.'' He began guiding her gently back in the direction she came.

''But, but it must be true,'' gabbled the crone, ''to strike... .''

''Why, dear Prymoxl, what has fire to do with your babies?''

''I... it is a miracle, Gentlehomo.''

''Well, a miracle. Merciless Void, what's a miracle? Something you don't understand. How can one thing you don't understand prove something else you don't understand? Don't you see, Prymoxl, it isn't proof at all, it is irrational; it is proving the unknown by the unknown! It is the blind leading the blind and they shall all fall into the ditch!''

Zan Fadron delivered all this in great heat. For a moment or two the old hag seemed to listen, but within a dozen words she lost the connection of what the promoter was saying, and started swaying first on Zan Fadron and then on her daughter, wailing again: ''My babies! All my pretty babies, dead, all, all, dead.''

She flung up her arms and broke into another paroxysm of weeping. She slumped down on the hot tufa pavement, and stared up at the Stars with her desolated, contorted face. She would have beat her head against the stones, had not Tilita and Zan Fadron lifted her bodily and moved on homeward.

''For the Void's sake, Prymoxl!'' panted Zan Fadron under his burden. ''Your old eyes deceived you! Thovas Tho can't strike fire! He... .''

''But I tell you, I saw him!'' choked the grimalkin. ''It snapped, and sputtered and burned!''

Suddenly it dawned upon Zan Fadron what Thovas Tho had done. ''Why, that was a match!'' he cried. ''Anybody can do that! Here! Here!'' He shook her to gain her attention. ''That was a match, Prymoxl, no trick at all, none at all.''

The old hag looked at him and straightened her face somewhat. ''Can you do it?'' she shivered.

''Sure, sure!'' Then he searched his pockets. Next he remembered he had given

Thovas Tho the last lucifer he possessed.

"I haven't one right here," he said easily, "but come with me to the paddlewood; I'll show you." His confidence was so obvious that the old baggage got weakly to her feet, and the trio crept forward in order that Zan Fadron might duplicate Thovas Tho's miracle and restore Prymoxl's babies to the Stars.

A certain gall-like humor seeped into the situation for the caravan agent. Apparently he was being forced into the role of defender of the faith, champion of the Stars. The three walked very slowly, for Prymoxl was spent. On the way, they saw Solgat Sol's bolsa lying on the beach with its top completed. Zan Fadron left Prymoxl at her baobab and went on alone to his paddlewood for the matches. The old crone was very doubtful. "You are sure you can do it?"

"Oh, yes. I'll butt miracle against miracle!"

She clung to his hands.

"Be sure and come back, Gentlevir, and show me this very night. I shall not sleep, primo, until you come back and show me."

Tilita followed him outside the door and kissed him with a curious wistfulness.

"Can you really strike fire out of a tree, dear primo?" she asked trembling.

"Can I strike a match?" Zan Fadron began to laugh.

Tilita peered into his eyes, and kissed him again, slowly, doubtfully.

Deep in the afternoon, Zan Fadron reached the Hopeless paddlewood just in time to see Thovas Tho start north through the Hopeless jungle. On his back were a pack of Catechisms and the promoter knew that his pockets were full of the wonderworking matches. To what unfortunate and cruel use he would put the matches! A realization of the unhappiness Thovas Tho would cause moved the promoter to shout at his man. The colporteur turned around and saw who it was.

"What is it, Gentlevir Zan Fadron?" enquired Thovas Tho briefly. "I'm in a hurry." The significance of the change from "Brothool" to "Gentlevir" was not lost on the promoter.

"I just wanted a moment, Thovas Tho."

"Well, that's all I can give you; my brothools are in trouble."

The promoter walked up and saw a bandage around the Fligsidian's head. It shocked the agent.

"You haven't been fighting?"

"The battles of the Forerunner Lords, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron. I'll have to ask you to talk fast."

The idea of Thovas Tho fighting amazed Zan Fadron. It switched him from the main issue. "I'll walk with you so you won't lose time. Who were you fighting?"

"The priests of the Idols."

"What for?"

"They wanted to take Chacala's baby. I told 'em they couldn't because my Masters had said words in the Catechism that prohibited the kidnaping of children from their parents. So we had a little scrimmage. They got Chacala, but I kept his baby and now I'm hurrying back to baptize it before we hitch into 'em regular."

There was something grotesque in this stocky little man hurrying back to baptize a baby before he massed his forces for an attack on the priests of the Stars. The promoter strode along at Thovas Tho's side through the heavy greenhouse smell of the Hopeless jungle. He was trying to think of some means to stop this coming strife. He had a business man's hatred of violence.

"Why not arbitrate this affair, Thovas Tho?"

"Arbitrate it!" Thovas Tho gave the promoter a sharp glance.

"Yes. Is this exactly a religious act, to be fighting and killing men and setting a whole people by the ears?"

"Gentlevir Zan Fadron," drawled the Darkool from the darkoid Fligsid, "do you know what the Catechism says in its blessed tenth chapter?"

With a sinking heart, Zan Fadron admitted he was not familiar with the Catechism's remarks in its tenth or any other chapter. He also had the uncomfortable conviction that the Catechism would bolster up Thovas Tho in his fire eating and the fight would proceed. These reflections were interrupted and justified by the colporteur quoting: "Here's what it says in its blessed tenth chapter, thirty-fourth and fifth verses: 'think not that We have come to send peace but a sword. For We come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. He that taketh not Our tasks and followeth after us, is not worthy of us. He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life, for Our sake, shall find it.'"

The promoter forsook that branch of his argument. "What I really called to you to stop for," said Zan Fadron, "was about upsetting the faith of these old women with matches. You tell them their children are dead and in hell, and then strike a match and they believe it. That's a cruel thing to do, Thovas Tho, it's a fiendish thing to do. You might just as well have stopped in and murdered Prymoxl's fourteen children. She's wild. She's nearly crazy. She came howling and shrieking. Oh, it was pitiful, Thovas Tho!"

The colporteur straightened belligerently. "Well, her children are dead and in hell!" he declared stoutly.

Zan Fadron knew there was no use arguing that point. "Yes, but why tell her?"

"So the rest of her children'll be saved, and her own soul won't be lost, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron."

He spoke briefly, as though it were a waste of words to argue with such a man.

The promoter was irritated. If he conceded Thovas Tho these grounds his logic was as unshakable as Yoovellus's largest mountain.

"But look here," cut in the agent testily, "when these old women don't believe, you prove you are right by striking an oxygen-generating match. Now, that's a hell of a miracle, striking a match! Aren't you ashamed of yourself, running poor old ignorant women crazy by striking matches!"

"Do you say it ain't a miracle?" demanded Thovas Tho grimly.

"Certainly it isn't! Nobody but a mountebank would stoop so low."

"Hold on, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, don't you admit the Gods know everything?"

With a certain uneasiness, Zan Fadron admitted this thesis.

"They saw I was going to need a sign and a wonder down here in Botomatl didn't They? So years before I was born, They inspired some ool to make matches so when I got down here in Botomatl, I might have a sign and a wonder to spread Their blessed kingdom. Ain't that just as much a miracle as me finding you in Lapis Lazuli, and finding a rope to climb down the cliffs?"

Zan Fadron was already turning away. What argument could be brought to bear on a man whose profoundest conviction was that the whole universe and all the ramifications of life that had gone before were but the advance preparations that made ready for his triumphal entrance on the stage of Yoovellus! As Zan Fadron turned away, Thovas Tho called: "If you don't believe an oxygen-generating match is a miracle, Gentlesap Zan Fadron, try making one."

Whether the colporteur had any innuendo tucked away in this invitation or not, Zan Fadron did not know. But when he reached his Hopeless paddlewood he found his bags had been opened. Further search showed not a match remained. The packs of both Thovas Tho and Solgat Sol revealed the same state of things. The colporteur had cornered miracles in Botomatl. In the last hour of day, the agent of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. fumbled through his belongings hoping one match might have been overlooked wherewith to soothe the old crone in the baobab. At last, in the bottom of his pack, his fingers stumbled over his electric torch. He picked it up and flashed it to make sure it would work.

Then he started back for the baobab with an easier heart. He had found a somewhat different sort of miracle, but he felt sure that with it he could convince old Prymoxl that her fourteen babies were leading blessed and profitable lives in the bright mansions of the Stars.

CHAPTER 15

On the way to the baobab, Zan Fadron turned off his night-vision implants, and turned on his electric torch to find his way, thus, naturally, but unthinkingly,

he was weakening the force of his miracle. He found Tilita and her mother standing outside the baobab watching the sky. He exhibited his electric torch with rather a foolish feeling, directing its rays here and there. He even made the mistake of explaining its mechanism to Tilita the best he could.

Old Prymoxl said that Thovas Tho had acted quite differently. He had struck her tree with his hand and fire had flamed up; he had nothing to strike with except his hand and flames had leaped out; and as for Zan Fadron, making a light and no fire, a firefly could do that much. Here the talk drifted away from the electric torch, which got no further attention, although Zan Fadron continued snapping it on and off in an absentminded way.

Both women were in a state of perturbation. They had been watching a light far to the north that reddened the sky. They could see glimpses of it through the trees. Zan Fadron joined their observation. He found the girl's hand and held it with affection. They stood looking at the light, while he was filled with that sense of comfort her touch always brought. Very gradually the illumination increased and spread skyward.

Zan Fadron instantly deduced what had probably occurred. The expedition had brought with it tubes of high-tech, oxygen-generating, incendiary gel. It was very powerful and quite wonderful stuff to have in the outback. One could smear it onto green, sap-filled, Hopeless wood, branches, logs, twigs, et cetera and they would burn. The gel was a godsend when no dry dead Hopeless vegetation could be found to fuel a campfire. No doubt, Thovas Tho had climbed a giant Hopeless redwood tree, smearing it with gel. Then he had, presumably, convened his congregation, lit a "miracle" oxygen-generating match, and multiplied the miracle a million fold by setting an entire green tree on fire. The Outools in Botomatl had an abundant supply of small portable oxygen generators suitable for campfires, et cetera, but these generators need dead, sap-free, dry vegetation to burn. The Botomatlian had neither seen nor heard of oxygen-generating, incendiary gel. They had never even imagined the stuff.

The sky above the burning giant redwood became filled with a reddish glow. From here and there came the call of a bird or of a zenoc eagleoid, or the chatter of some animal at this untimely radiance. Strange delicate perfumes became sensible in the air from the burning of this aromatic redwood. The lovers slipped their arms about each other and speculated in whispers on the origin of the light. Tilita thought it was the Stars climbing down the western palisades to avenge Thovas Tho's impiety. He explained to her his suspicions, giving complete details of the oxygen-generating, incendiary gel.

As they stood, something crashed into the baobab high over their heads, followed by a falling through the leaves. A zenoc eagleoid, half stunned, hit the ground within twenty feet of the watchers. No doubt it had been driven from its

aerie by the flames, suffered smoke inhalation, and had blundered into the crest of the baobab.

The huge zenoc birdoid filled the Hopeless jungle with its shrieks when Zan Fadron turned his electric torch on it, and it finally scuttled off through the Hopeless underbrush like any turkey. From the lake came the distant laughter of loons.

A confusion of sounds so faint as to be nameless seemed gradually to arise from all over the crater. The glow increased as the flame reached higher and higher up the giant redwood, by far the tallest tree in that area. Presently, at some distance away, Zan Fadron saw three figures hurrying through the Hopeless jungle toward the teocalla.

In the hope of finding some information, he ran toward them, calling and flashing his light. His answer was three shrieks, the whisper of an arrow past his head, and the fugitives vanished like partridges in a covert.

The wide commotion seemed to focus on the temple of the Stars, and the first real knowledge of what was taking place came to the watchers from a man hobbling through the jungle from the west. The stranger carried a bow and arrow and featherwork shield of an Botomatlian warrior. He had a bullet wound in his thigh. He stopped when he saw the women and old Prymoxl tied a cloth around the leg to stanch the blood. The wounded man was still dazed. He told an uncertain tale of a terrible ool who pointed his hand at him; came a flash of lightning and a terrific thunderbolt which struck him in the leg and brought him down. His comrades broke, and the Forerunnerians charged over him after the fugitives. Then he had hobbled toward the teocalla.

"There was no use in staying," he shivered, "for who can fight the Gods?"

The caravan promoter and the female Outool each gave a shoulder to the wounded warrior and the four of them set off toward the lake. Presently they found the jungle was full of refugees. Dozens of persons, some to the right, some to the left, overtook and passed them. It seemed all Botomatl was converging upon the teocalla. All were fearstruck. Each party avoided all others as if fearful of enemies everywhere. When the promoter reached the lake, he saw scores of boats paddling in toward the temple from the north. The fleeing water craft were silhouetted in black against the red reflections in the water, caused by the nearby burning giant Hopeless redwood.

The promoter found Solgat Sol's bolsa with the queer top to it. It suddenly struck him that Thovas Tho had planned an attack by water, too, and the top to the bolsa was meant as a sort of armor. Zan Fadron put the soldier and the two women in this little battleship of Hopeless reeds and joined the fleeing flotilla for the last two miles. Every boat pulled for the great piazza with a sort of silent desperation.

Out of the whole throng fleeing templeward, not a sound was heard save the dip of oars. Just a little to the north, the fire from the burning giant Hopeless green

redwood soared skyward, showering sparks over a wide area. Here and there tips of flame leaped above and seemed to tickle the Constellations, flinging up volumes of smoke, red of bottom and black of top.

Toward the east, the great facade caught the crimson light. In the piazza swarmed crowds of fugitives; their continual drone came over the water, punctuated now and then with a cry, or by the sound of sobbing. Along the strip of sand in front of the great piazza Zan Fadron saw three or four men running to and fro, meeting every boatload of fugitives that came ashore. When the promoter's bolsa drew to the sand, a little hunchback splashed into the water to pull the craft ashore, at the same time calling shrilly: "Gentlevir Zan Fadron, Gogoma wants to speak to you, if you will have the kindness. He has sent runners for you everywhere."

Zan Fadron recognized Quiz-Quiz. Zan Fadron agreed, got his crowd ashore, and the four with their guide set out across the piazza.

Along a center line of the pavement stood a regiment of men in marching order. Their spears and the color of their featherwork shields gleamed dully in the crimson light. They formed a strange picture, and as Zan Fadron started for the teocalla, these men marched away toward the west.

Quiz-Quiz watched the soldiers go. "That's our second army," he said. "The first has been cut to pieces. Nobody can stand before ools with thunder in their hands."

As the army marched away, the murmur of the fugitives fell to silence. Here and there a woman shrieked and clung to one of the warriors. During the interlude, from far across the lake came the faint staccato of Solgat Sol's automatic needler.

Quiz-Quiz led the way to the northern side entrance. Zan Fadron entered a hallway cut through solid stone and lighted by several tapers suspended in bolls of oil. The ceiling itself was so high it was lost in gloom. Here and there, in the long corridor, a priest moved about on some obscure errand. The moment the great shutters clanged shut after the promoter, the tumult of the piazza was muffled to a whisper. Quiz-Quiz directed Tilita and old Prymoxl to a stone bench carved into the side of the passage; then he conducted Zan Fadron forward and left the women sitting in the dim light, oppressed by the peculiar desolation of a vast public building.

Off each side of the hallway were located doors. One of these the hunchback opened and bowed Zan Fadron into a sort of audience chamber. At one end of the chamber spread a tapestry of featherwork, rising to a frieze of dull yellow metal. Under low-beam, all the color was subdued in the light of some dozen tapers, but Zan Fadron could imagine how vivid would be the sheen by high-beam.

On a dais, against this background, overflowing a huge chair, sat the naked, yellow bulk of Gogoma. Standing behind him, a little to each side, were two zenocs,

the like of which Zan Fadron had neither seen nor heard before. They were winged men with fangs! Each wore an antigrav harness. Each harness had a holster, carrying an automatic needler. Next to the winged men were many cages, stacked on top of each other. Each cage had in it a live bird or zenoc birdoid. One of the winged men opened a cage, removing a zenoc eagleoid. He placed it into a leather bag, forming the leather around the birdoid's head and neck. With a quick, fierce movement, the winged man twisted the birdoid's head off. Then he felt of the body of the birdoid through the sack, form-fitting the bag around the body's bleeding hole where the neck had been, constricting it. Then he opened the bag so that the constricted area slightly protruded. He formed his lips around the bleeding hole, releasing the constriction. He then guzzled the surging, pumping, squirting blood as if it was a bottle of vintage wine. So, Solgat Sol's tale of seeing a humanoid vampire in Sekrio Vampiro seemed, at long last, to be based on fact. During all this, Gogoma sat as if it all were a dull routine.

"Who are they?" asked Zan Fadron in consternation.

"They are two of Pachacamac's officers. Pachacamac is the zenoc warlord who owns this entire region, including Botomatl and a vast surrounding area," answered Gogoma politely.

The priest and his surroundings produced such a rich decorative effect that into Zan Fadron's mind came the immobile figure of the woman. He became dubious, after all, whether it were not sculpture. That piece of art could not be beyond the hand that lifted Gogoma's saffron bulk into such a decorative ensemble.

The air of the cavern was neither close nor stuffy, although it held the chill of all caverns. Nevertheless sweat beaded the priest's great form. On a dais near Gogoma, lay a pulse rifle and an automatic needler.

A fifth man rushed into the room, an old Outool who ran to stand in front of what might be called the archiepiscopal throne. The panicked Outool's entrance had caught him amid sentence: "... fire from a tree with his hand, O holy Gogoma, and the live green tree burned up. Then he promised that all the children of my son's wife should live in Botomatl, and he said his Gods would push back the walls of Botomatl, and unroll the mountains into a vast a fertile country, and, and... ." Here the Outool struck his head with his hand "... and perhaps he could, holy, Gogoma, for he dashed fire from a tree!

"My son, who already has his one child, took up his lance and joined this wondermaker. But I am old, holy Gogoma. All my babies but two are in the Stars. I must join them. I ran into the jungle. The other man, who stood persuading my son's wife, lifted his hand and hurled thunder after me. It struck off this finger —" The wretch held up the stump of a digit, still bleeding. The two winged vampires were visibly aroused, lifting their lips higher above their fangs, causing the old Outool to put his bleeding finger quickly back down. "I turned. I ran."

The high priest interrupted the narrative with a wave of his pendulous arm. "You may go Maulo."

The Outool backed away, prostrating himself at every step, and gripping the stump of his severed finger to prevent bleeding.

Gogoma then dismissed the hunchback and waited impassively until the door was closed. Then he turned to Zan Fadron. "Gentlesap," he said in his unruffled, furry voice. "I sent for you because I overheard your words to Prymoxl concerning miracles, and I knew, at last, another man of intelligence had come to Botomatl."

The caravan agent acknowledged the naked man's compliment with a slight bow.

"So I ask you, Gentlehomo, to tell me how does Gentlehomo Thovas Tho strike fire and hurl thunder."

"With oxygen-generating matches and an automatic needler, just like yours there on the table," he related, pointing to the dais. On afterthought he added: "They are usual, ordinary, things, much less miraculous than Hopeless grass and babies."

"I knew they were usual, Gentlevir. I have been to Lapis Lazuli, doing errands for Pachacamac. I've bought needlers, pulse rifles, and matches in the stores there. Pachacamac confiscated all my matches, and all but one needler and one pulse rifle. What I wanted to find out was whether you possess matches and needlers?"

"No," admitted the promoter. "I had some matches, but Thovas Tho took them all."

"Can you make more matches or needlers, Gentlevir?"

"I haven't the materials, or the skill, Gogoma."

The high priest looked at Zan Fadron. "Are you so poor a man, Gentlevir, as not to be able to make what you consume?"

"Wait, don't judge me hastily. In Lapis Lazuli, did you not notice that one ool does one thing well, and nothing else. Take my boot, for instance... ." the promoter held out his foot. "The labor of five thousand ools went into that boot. One ool raised the cattle; one ool killed the cow, others stripped the hide, a whole tannery of ools cured it, many thousands of ools worked over it in a Zaspian or Quelsian shoe factory. Still another small army of ools grew the cotton and made laces for the eyes. It requires three ools at machines to put the tip on the lace; that is all three ools do, put tips on strings. Of course it took countless numbers of ools to make the robots who do much of the work. So that is why I can make neither matches nor needlers."

Certain faint movements of the hairs of the behemoth's nose and brows betrayed the astonishment he felt at this glimpse of the highly specialized labor of a modern factory. "By the Endless Void!" he rumbled. "I guess I did notice many

signs of that in Lapis Lazuli, now that you've mentioned it. The ools of Zasp and Quels must be as the leaves of the jungle to have so many workers. Just see what can be accomplished with the lives of many children; your priests must let all your babies live."

Zan Fadron looked curiously at the mountain of flesh. "Don't you?"

The bulk shook a jellied negative. "That is another point I wished to speak about, Gentlesap Zan Fadron."

"About babies?"

"Yes, Gentlevir."

The promoter stared at the vast man curiously. "What do you want to say about babies?"

"I wanted to show you why it is impossible for all babies born in Botomatl... to live."

Zan Fadron's regard slowly filled with horror. "Do you mean you... ."

The bulk nodded impassively. "Thousands every year, Gentlehomo."

As the promoter gaped at the vast ool, slowly there dawned upon him the significance of many riddles in Botomatl; old Prymoxl's babies living in the Stars, the joy of the ill-starred Chacala at the promise of life for his child, the insurrection that at this moment fired Botomatl. It was because many babies were not allowed in Botomatl. This huge red man polyp of a priest forbade life to children. He must have destroyed hundreds, thousands of innocents. The priest swelled in Zan Fadron's eyes into a vast Moloch.

As all the implications of this murderous gelatinous creature struck home at Zan Fadron, horror tickled his throat with its nasty feather; saliva formed in a little pool under his tongue, and he swallowed sickly. The cool air of the cavern grew clammy — the murderer of thousands of babies — it reminded him of some Zaspian apartments where landlords forbid children. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Gogoma, who sat watching the promoter, heaved his bulk slowly out of his chair, took a waddle to the caravan agent's side, then lifted him bodily and seated him in the huge throne. The promoters's slimness occupied perhaps a fifth of it. The behemoth clapped his pulpy hands. Quiz-Quiz appeared. The priest ordered a goblet of wine and gave it to Zan Fadron.

"Don't misunderstand," cautioned Gogoma, "only a small percentage are killed; the vast majority are placed into stasis and sold into slavery. They are shipped in stasis to Lapis Lazuli, sold to a wholesaler, who, in turn, sells to offdarkoid slave markets. A few might end up as slaves here on Yoovellus but most go offdarkoid. Gentlesap Zan Fadron, your heart does you honor, but all ools have hearts and few have brains. I wish to touch your brain.

"Look at Botomatl, Gentlehomo. Our maidens wed at thirteen years; and there-

after at each nine months or ten, their babies nuzzle them with milky mouths. Within each ten months, Gentlevir, our population adds a half. Within thirteen years our people would be eight times as numerous as at present. During the fourteenth year, with new marriages, our people could increase three fourths our whole number; the next year it would double, and so with increasing strides to twice, thrice, fourfold, and Botomatl is but a little space, the width of a stride, imprisoned in moveless bounds. How could we house or feed or clothe so huge a press of life?''

The rhythm of the naked man's address held Zan Fadron's ear, and now the wine had restored his poise sufficiently for him to follow the thread of the argument. He was not sure whether this were a rhetorical pause or a question to be answered. However, presently he said: ''Gogoma, the civilized way, the merciful way to deal with the question of excess population is to allow lack of food to starve... .'' Then the hideousness of his own solution brought him to silence. Never before had Zan Fadron put the conditions of modern life simply and frankly before himself. The sweating ton agreed with an oscillation of the fat that draped his arm.

''That is true, Gentlesap, Zan Fadron, and for many years such was our custom in Botomatl before the arrival of Pachacamac. We allowed hunger to reduce our numbers, but hunger is much more cruel, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron. Moreover it demoralized our people. It made of them murderers, liars, lechers, and beggars. The strong abused the weak. Armies rose up and fought for food and starved other armies. Starvation became part of military tactics.

''Such horrors took place that no human being could imagine it, had not our forefathers knotted all this lore in the quippus which you or any literate ool may unknot for himself. When our forefathers saw all these terrible things, Gentlevir, the priests, together with Pachacamac, made a law that all babies, save the first two, should either die or be sold into slavery, whichever Pachacamac chose.''

Zan Fadron had leaned back against the back of the archiepiscopal throne. He nodded faintly.

''But it was a crude law. Our women hid their babies, and when found they fought the priests; they tore their flesh, and when their babies were taken, some sat on their babies graves and wept, some driveled to the Stars, some flung away all modesty and stalked the day as naked as I, and many died.

''And then the high priest, Valhue, talked and prayed to Pachacamac to send some means to take our babies to the bright mansions of the Stars and keep them there until the mothers came. One morning he awoke to find the Web of the Stars spread where it is today; a miraculous net, Gentlesap, and as the Constellations dip beneath the lake, babies in the Web are transported to its effulgent halls, and the women are content.''

''They believe it?''

The high priest lifted his hands. ''Gentlehomo, they must, else they would go

mad and die. All humanity must have some religion, or the horrors of life will overcome them. Pachacamac is the God of the living, not the God of the dead.''

A silence fell between the two ools. From out on the piazza came the tumult of the people clamoring for their babies. It might have been the roaring of the lake's waves pounding the beach in a raging storm.

''Why have you told me this, Gogoma?''

''So you can tell your friend, Gentlevir Thovas Tho.''

''Thovas Tho?''

''Yes, Gentlesap. Tell Gentlesap Thovas Tho that it is time for me to retire. I've been at this job for much too long. Tell him he may become the high priest, that his Gods may become the Gods of Botomatl if he will only preserve the Web of the Stars, and obey the zenoc warlord who owns this place. That alone is necessary. Gentlehomo Thovas Tho would make a good high priest. He is hard and cruel, and unmarried. He seems to have no desire for marriage.''

''Why shouldn't a priest marry?''

''Because no man can have children of his own and attend the sacrifices. It is especially emotionally traumatic to know and see Pachacamac eat the flesh and blood of someone's innocent child.''

The color drained from Zan Fadron's face. He sat in the large throne and brooded over this strange request. He looked at the sweating red man.

''Thovas Tho would not listen to me, Gogoma.''

''Will he not listen to reason? Does he not have the wisdom to realize that Pachacamac has the power to destroy him?''

''Well, he goes by a book. I'd say it substantially clouds his exercise of wisdom.''

''Does his book permit babies?''

''Yes, it is a book for an open country, and a country cool in temperature.

''But is Thovas Tho not a priest in his own country?''

''No, just a follower.''

The naked ecclesiastic shook his head slowly. ''Such is the danger of lifting ignorant ools to the priesthood. They believe what they teach. They serve the letter of the law, not its spirit. They serve the Gods of the dead, not the Gods of the living.''

The high priest seemed to shake off some settling despondency.

''Go to him, Gentlevir; all you can do is to go to him and explain... .''

''He will probably kill me.''

''Very likely, my brother. I will pray.—''

''To whom?''

"I, Gogoma, the high priest, will pray, my brother."

"Gogoma, before I leave, there is something very important that I must ask you."

Gogoma nodded solemnly.

"There are at least two companies in Lapis Lazuli trying to establish an air line from Lapis Lazuli to here, with tourist hotels, and resorts. Among other things, it would help the slave trade. The only flying craft would be dirigibles. All the other zenoc warlords under the proposed air route have agreed. Your master is the only one who has yet to agree. Would your master agree? Would you be so kind as to ask your master? Are you familiar with what a dirigible is?"

"Yes, Gentlesap, I do know what a dirigible is. It's a large lighter-than-air craft, much like a giant balloon with a motor. Pachacamac has already briefed me on the matter. The other zenoc warlords under the proposed route have already communicated their decision to Pachacamac. Unlike the others, Pachacamac is very determined never to agree. I hope you never have a friend on that first dirigible flight. I fear the dirigible will meet a swift demise at the hands of our friends here," he said in a very serious tone, pointing toward the two zenoc winged men.

Visibly distressed, Zan Fadron's shoulders slumped slightly as he nodded his head agonizingly but affirmatively. He got slowly out of the priestly seat. He felt queerly weak. It seemed hardly worth while to walk out the door, or to speak to Thovas Tho, or to do anything. Somehow Gogoma's talk had stripped the veil off things that were best left veiled. He walked out into the corridor. On the stone bench, Tilita still sat. The taper over her head had guttered out.

Somehow the sight of the maiden seated at the door of the temple melted some frozen thing in Zan Fadron's heart. Suddenly, he understood why women, often, were the religious moiety of a man-woman pair. They have so much more at stake. Guarding a fetus and later a baby is a tremendous and important responsibility that sits upon the shoulders of a woman in ways that are different and often harder than on a man's. A great tenderness ached in his throat. He ran to her and caught her in his arms. He kissed her with an overflowing compassion and a profound joy in her womanhood. His tears dropped on her neck and bosom. The Darkoolian female herself sobbed in sympathy, not knowing why.

Beside them, old Prymoxl snuffled, thinking of her babies in the Stars. She was no obstacle to the fondling between Zan Fadron and Tilita. So much of the masculine had she held in her that she was epicene. It was the masculine part of her that wanted to physically assault those that had taken her babies. So many children had she borne, only to have them stolen, that her personality was scattered; she was at life's point of departure, an old caravanserai without a caravan to welcome into its quadrangled inner court; deserted now.

Here and there through the vast dimly lighted corridor moved a priest of the

Stars on some obscure errand.

CHAPTER 16

As Zan Fadron crossed the great piazza on his strange mission as an advocate of infanticide and child enslavement, he was amazed that he had not discovered long before the existence of these practices in Botomatl. Every incident he could now recall pointed so simply in that direction. On every hand he had heard the Stars myth, which veiled the custom with the thinnest drapery. Especially poignant was the sudden realization that his firm, Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. might very well be a wholesaler, marketing the Botomatlian enslaved babies, shipping them offdarkoid in the cargo holds of its starship freighters. It was a very depressing thought for Zan Fadron. Some people love to enjoy a juicy steak, but don't want to be present when the cattle are brutally slaughtered to make the steaks.

In the offices of his firm on Maiden Lane, Zan Fadron had by chance taken an Instantcourse in ancient Terran history. Thus he had known that almost every barbarous people of ancient Terra had indulged in the practice of infanticide, such as the ancient Terran tribes and nations of China, Japan, India, the South Seas; the history of the Jews record it; America pioneered prenatal infanticide; France issued tax cuts for childlessness. Yet, with the solution of the mystery of Botomatl written across every page of the history in that Instantcourse, Zan Fadron had not seen it. The caravanist was chagrined at himself.

It was dawn now. Of course "dawn" was zero seven hundred hours (7:00 a.m.) and was roughly just as dark as any other time, since a darkoid has no sun to rise at dawn. Zan Fadron switched to high-beam to view that the glare of the burning tree gave way to an atmosphere filled with smoke. The vast walls of the crater were hidden and revealed by the accident of the smoke. It hung over the lake in long draperies that stirred with the breath of the wind. It was aromatic with the odor of unknown resins, and now and then, by some fortuity of the breeze, he obtained a view of the whole of Botomatl, as if the smoke was a vast censor among the Sedna Mountain Range.

On his way westward down the beach, Zan Fadron paused for a moment beside the net of the Stars to speculate for the hundredth time on its enigma. This time he attacked the problem with a certain freshness, because the discovery of infanticide and child enslavement suggested the net must be just as simple if he could lay a finger on the clew.

So he stood studying the net, reviewing critically every incident connected with it: Obmo Eno's tale; his own grimposauri on the rim; the vicuna; the murder of Chacala; the winding of the unearthly cord about the victims; and at last, the ghastly dried shells of the murdered. And alongside this there popped into his

mind the immobile figure kneeling in the cavern. But certainly that had nothing to do with the others.

No doubt it was all perfectly simple; as simple as infanticide and child enslavement. When it was explained to him, he would be just as chagrined, just as amazed at his own stupidity. He went over the phenomena minutely: rope, glue, sheep, grimposauri, winged men. His brain seemed on the very fringe of the solution. He could feel the answer formulating. Just one more tiny advance. An adumbration came, a sort of indistinct horror. It grew clearer. He had it!

The truth of the net was... . Then, just as he was deciphering the shadowy solution, there came that miserable sensation as if something just in sight had silently faded. He felt as if something inside his head, which was opening, had gently closed. Such profound exasperations are familiar to every thinker.

Zan Fadron stodgily went forward fighting obstinately to recapture the flair, the mental connection, but it was gone. That cell of his brain was closed and lost; that picture in his mind was faded and had vanished. He tramped on still struggling. There was something sinister, almost tragic in this near-illumination, in this warning he had almost heard, and which had died in silence.

The promoter moved on toward the tumult in the west. That noise he heard was swinging Thovas Tho into power. It was transforming a Darkool who was a darkoid miner from the darkoid Fligsid into a hot weather hierarch; at least until the local zenoc warlord acted, or until Gogoma, his army, and his winged men launched a successful counterattack. For the first time he suspected himself of having overlooked an opportunity to study at firsthand Thovas Tho, one of those men about whom history gossips.

It was with some idea of rectifying his oversight that Zan Fadron hurried forward when, some two hundred yards down the beach, a group of men appeared palely drawn in the midst of the smoke. They were marching up the beach toward Zan Fadron, and at the head of the column, under guard, walked a man with his hands tied behind him. The caravaneer moved on down to meet them, not knowing quite who were the captors or who the captured. He peered through the smoke, trying to make out to which side the God of battles leaned, when to his amazement, he saw the prisoner was Solgat Sol.

The promoter stopped stock still at this abrupt reversal of what he had fancied. These, then, were Gogoma's men who had captured the Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil and his needler.

What the warriors of the Stars would do with Solgat Sol was too easy to guess. Thought of the Horgadilian being cast into the net horrified Zan Fadron. Certainly the muleteer was no favorite with the caravaneer, nevertheless he decided he would use his influence to obtain clemency.

The promoter was about to turn back to the temple, when still other soldiers

streamed into sight out of the smoke; long ranks of spearmen, slingers, archers, followed by women and children behind the van. The warriors wore the feathered armor of the traditional Botomatlian style, and their polychrome hues under two-beam made a fine show of color through the drifting smoke.

A spearman in front lifted his weapon, waved it like a long baton, and suddenly the whole throng broke into singing. This was extraordinary, but to Zan Fadron's further amazement, he recognized one of the colporteur's songs. The Outools sang it like thunder:

"Red gushed the tides from the Forerunner Lords' sides;
They bled for us, so red for us;
Wide flows the flood of Forerunner Lords' blood.
By apparatus we stand, on Yoovellus our land."

These words were sung to the dismal tune of the ancient song, Old Hundred, but instead of adhering to the major scale of the ancient Anglo-Saxon, the Outools fell into their own weird mode. It filled Hopeless jungle and lake with an unutterable melancholy. It was the folk music of an imprisoned people, of infanticides and child enslavements, wounded to death by their own vital pressure of overpopulation. In the midst of this singing army, the agent caught sight of Thovas Tho. The colporteur was not singing, but was threading his way to the fore ranks of his victorious army.

The whole situation was incomprehensible to Zan Fadron. He hurried down to intercept the chieftain. A number of lances made way to admit the caravanist to their ranks. The song continued without interruption. The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent waited impatiently for the singing to cease, curious to know what had brought Solgat Sol to handcuffs. The Horgadilian was in no wise downcast. He strode along among his guards, chin up, swinging his green velvet shoulders from side to side. From a side view, Zan Fadron thought he was smiling. The whole affair might have been a play in which Solgat Sol refused to take his part seriously.

After many stanzas of the scarlet song were finished, Thovas Tho spoke first. He sounded less as if he were starting a sentence, than continuing aloud some troubled train of thought. "I want to do what's right and merciful, Brothool Zan Fadron. It's my hope and prayer; I want to act exactly like my Forerunner Gods would want of me."

The caravaneer surmised this referred to Thovas Tho's future treatment of the priests of the Stars. "The difficulty is," stated Zan Fadron, "your Forerunner Gods set you no precedent there, Thovas Tho. He lost; you won."

"I was talking about Brothool Solgat Sol, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"Oh, I was wondering about Solgat Sol. That's the queerest reverse I ever heard of. Did he run from the enemy?"

"Oh, no, no indeed!" cried the colporteur. "He was a lion of strength and courage before the enemy, Brothool Zan Fadron; he saved my life twicet from the priests of the Idols!"

"Then what did he do?"

Thovas Tho tramped silently for several minutes. Once he lifted an arm and wiped the corner of his eyes with the back of his hand. Finally he said: "He misused the power the Forerunner Gods gave him, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"The needler?"

"The matches and the gel."

Zan Fadron looked at the colporteur, then at the muleteer trying to construe this information into sense. He repeated the words, "matches" and "gel" carefully, as if some secondary meaning might pop out of it.

"I mean, Brothool Zan Fadron, that Brothool Solgat Sol with his matches and gel convinced some of the wives of my men that he was an angel from Forerunner Heaven who could cause even a giant green tree to burst into flame and burn by his very touch alone. He, he didn't use the matches and gel right, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"You don't mean... ." The promoter broke off with a slack jaw. Yet, now that it had happened, it was much like Solgat Sol as his own picture. Just what one might have expected. But it was such an outrageous sacrilege!

"The men who are guarding him are the husbands of the wives he was seducing," explained the colporteur somberly.

Zan Fadron looked at the seven guards around the gallant Darkool from Horgadil. The muleteer himself maintained his jaunty swagger. Now and then he glanced around at the women in the rear ranks. Once he caught Zan Fadron's incredulous eyes. He waved gracefully, called a brilliant, "Good day, Gentlehomo," and smiled.

It was evident that his position at the head of the column as prisoner, the crimes he had committed, and whatever punishment was in store for him, preened his vanity. He was by far the jauntiest ool in the ranks. His call to Zan Fadron aroused a twitter among the women behind the vanguard.

"What are they going to do with him?" asked Zan Fadron at length.

"Chuck him in the net, Brothool Zan Fadron," the colporteur nodded woodenly up the lake.

"Thovas Tho, you are not going to allow that!"

"It's the law of Botomatl, Brothool Zan Fadron."

"What if it is!" cried Zan Fadron in horror. "You are in charge of Botomatl now. You've won!"

"'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's', Brothool Zan Fadron."

"But, man!" cried the promoter aroused. "I tell you it's horrible! You should have seen Chacala. He was a shell, a crust. I fished him out of the whirlpool." The caravaneer shivered. "Make 'em shoot the poor devil with his own needler, Thovas Tho."

The colporteur tramped on with the thick skin of his brow corrugated into three wrinkles. In spite of a cool breeze, sweat beaded his face.

"Brothool Zan Fadron," he said at last, "this is the worst stump I ever plowed into. I don't know what to do. The Catechism doesn't shed any specific light on this here type of situation. I dunno what to do."

He crooked his forefinger and flung the water from his forehead with a plowman's gesture. The marching ools rounded the point of Hopeless palms and came into sight of the huge facade of the temple. Over the line of ools ran a spontaneous spell of deep breathing, an audible tribute to the wonder and hugeness of that facade wrung even from an apostate army. They were in sight, also, of the cumulus which hid the sinister net of the Stars.

Zan Fadron looked at it with dry lips. He could feel the muscles of his legs as distinctly as if he himself were to be thrown onto its limed and twisted ropes. He made one last mental effort to fathom the secret of the contrivance and, for the last time, failed.

The muleteer strode ahead in his soiled green jacket, and all that Zan Fadron knew of that gay, irresponsible rogue revisited his mind. He thought of the wakantey girls of Azak Nak, of the Outoolian girls along the trail, of the fact that he, Zan Fadron, had persuaded Solgat Sol to come down into the crater, of how Solgat Sol had helped carry him down the precipice, and of how they had fought over Tilita.

As he stared at the condemned man, Zan Fadron realized that something in his heart had wrapped itself around this capering irrepressible animal. He could hear the fool saying: "Gentlefem, when I look at you, I have a yearning, a wild, uncontrollable... ."

Poor devil, perhaps he had! At the foot of the hummock the guards halted their prisoner. The army filed past and took up a semicircle around the executioners and the condemned. Zan Fadron glanced at the great piazza. It was deserted save for a shapeless brown form in the great entrance. It was Gogoma waiting for Thovas Tho to come and either accept his offer or reject it.

Solgat Sol mounted to the top of the hillock and struck a fine pose against the sky. His eyes barely rested on the net, then swept over lake and palisades to the peaks beyond. Zan Fadron thought again how he had persuaded the Darkool from

the darkoid Horgadil to come down into the crater.

"Gentlevirs," said the captive to the archers. "If you will permit it, I would like to jump into the net myself with free hands. It is for the sake of the Gentlefems. I have friends... ." He made a graceful gesture toward them "...who would prefer to see me go a freeman."

Thovas Tho walked up the little acclivity and stood beside the muleteer. The way he laid his hand on Solgat Sol's shoulder made Zan Fadron realize there was a bond between the muleteer and the darkoid miner from the darkoid Fligsid that he had never suspected. The colporteur was much the same size and build as Solgat Sol. Zan Fadron thought he was going to cut the rope. Instead, Thovas Tho said very simply: "Soldiers of the Forerunner Gods, this brothool ain't ready to die. I know it is the law in Botomatl that adulterers' lovers are to be thrown into the net, but it is also the law that one may voluntarily take the punishment for another. So, I'm going in Brothool Solgat Sol's place."

There was a gasp of horror, and a breaking out of protest along the ranks. Men left the line and came running in with dissuasions.

The colporteur waved them all down. "I tell you!" he cried in his nasal voice. "Brothool Solgat Sol ain't ready to appear before his Forerunner Gods! He'll go to Forerunner hell shore, forever and ever! He saved my life twicet. He stood by me when every ool-jack left me."

A woman walled: "But Gogoma will kill our babies!"

"No, he won't Sistool. Our men have won. If I am necessary for the salvation of Botomatl, you know the Forerunner Gods ain't goin' to let nothin' happen to me in that net!"

"But, Gentlehomo, nobody ever has escaped... ."

"And nobody ever come out of a lion's den neither 'til someone done it; and nobody ever walked through a fary furnace till someone first done it, neither. Don't you know our Forerunner Gods that made Botomatl, an' all it contains, can save me from a few ropes and some glue if They wants to?"

Zan Fadron was by his friend's side. "Listen, Thovas Tho," he begged, "you are not fooling with oxygen-generation matches here. Don't risk that...thing. Turn Solgat Sol loose!"

"Brothool Zan Fadron, if the Forerunner Gods had to go through trials and tribulations themselves in order to save the human race, don't you know there ain't no sich thing as jest turnin' a sinner aloose? Sin's got to be paid for."

This fundamental difference in opinion between the two men angered Zan Fadron. "But how? Why? What good does suffering do? Shadows in the Void! Ool! There's no connection between one ool's guilt and another ool's suffering. It's not only unjust, its shameful, its revolting! Stop! Stop! I tell you no ool in his right mind would kill himself or his friend in such a fiendish deathtrap! Damned the Void!

Thovas Tho! Solgat Sol guided you, protected you, risked his own life for you; gave you his sincere friendship. You owe a debt to him, but you also owe a debt to yourself. No one should be in that murderous net! A debt... .''

Thovas Tho was striding down to the net.

''But hell isn't a debt's payment!'' yelled Zan Fadron. ''Punishment is simply corrective or revengeful but not upon yourself. Don't... Don't go on that... thing. Your whole scheme is as immoral and unsound as... .''

Suddenly the caravanist gave up howling and ran to Solgat Sol, whom his captors had reluctantly loosed.

''Get your needler, Solgat Sol! ''Those priests are not going to work their nasty trick on Thovas Tho!''

Solgat Sol motioned toward one of the spearmen. Zan Fadron jumped at the ool. ''Gimme that gun!''

He had it before the Darkool could assent or object. He thrust it into the Horgadilian's hand and hurried with him down to the water's edge.

''Now, sit right here, with that needler drawn! Shoot any hellfired thing you see move!''

By this time Thovas Tho was in the limed meshes. He was trying to walk across the viscous strands. When he pulled up a foot, the cord untwisted but stuck and stretched. As he tried to go forward with both feet fast, he lost his balance and his hands went down. He shoved with one hand and tried to loose the other. At every straining effort other parts of his body inevitably touched the viscid tubes. He seemed to be pulling the unearthly ropes up over himself. It held his clothes and the struggles of the powerful little ool ripped the seams. His clothing slowly parted and tore off. The stuff laid its grip on his red skin. He was prone with one arm outspread and the other twisted under him. His efforts distorted the net. His muscles balled up. The thing gave to his efforts. He struggled against nothing. Zan Fadron could endure it no longer.

''Get a pole,'' he shouted, and as nobody made a move, the promoter leaped up and sprinted over the little rise toward a shaft of bamboo that had drifted ashore. Then he realized that all the army were kneeling away from the web, droning the prayer that Tilita had taught him. The promoter reached the pole. He flew back up the slope. The net was empty. He rushed Solgat Sol who sat, with needler still outstretched, staring white-eyed at the empty strands.

''Did he get out, Solgat Sol?'' chattered Zan Fadron. ''Did he get out? Where is he?''

He shook the ool with the poised firearm. Solgat Sol closed his mouth, wet his lips and stared at Zan Fadron.

A great horror came over the promoter. ''Solgat Sol! Damn the Void! Where is

he?''

The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil seemed dazed. ''G-G-Gentlevir,'' he mumbled in shock.

''Didn't you see him? Didn't you see what went with him?''

Solgat Sol shook his head no.

Zan Fadron looked at the net; then back at Solgat Sol.

''I... I... took my eyes off just a second... only an instant.''

''Merciless Void! Ool! What for?''

Solgat Sol moistened his lips and suddenly fell to sobbing: ''I... I was looking at a w-woman.''

CHAPTER 17

For upward of a Zaspian hour, perhaps two Zaspian hours, Thovas Tho's ools remained near the hillock, moving about aimlessly, talking in whispers, staring at the net wherein their leader had disappeared. Some wept. The night ended, the sunrise of dawn appeared, and the day began. Of course, being on a darkoid, there was no sun to rise in the ''sunrise of dawn'' but the twenty-four-hour-a-day darkness seemed to enjoy such Darkoolian myths in their modes of speech. At last, tired out with fighting, marching, and lack of sleep, apprehensive of the priests, and leaderless, the colporteur's disciples began to dribble away by twos and threes. The last to stay by the mound were three women. The three were Thovas Tho's most loyal disciples. And so, Thovas Tho's mission ended.

The caravaneer watched them go with gray thoughts. Although he had always liked the colporteur, throughout their adventure together, he had always felt the revivalist was a fanatic, following the craziest cosmogony; still, his abrupt taking off left the Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent deeply troubled and shaken and somewhat aimless. Fanatic or not, Thovas Tho had been a friend, and one he could truly count on; within, of course certain confines of Forerunnerianism.

A breeze sprang up out of the east and cleared away much of the smoke. Under two-beam, it stirred lines of silver over the blue water and blurred the reflections of the peaks. The breeze felt wonderful due to the ever-present heat that permeated Botomatl. Zan Fadron got slowly to his feet and walked down the beach toward the great piazza. Lying in front of the immense pavement, he saw Solgat Sol's bolsa with its queer top. It was a discarded little battleship. It still lay half-drawn out on the sand where Quiz-Quiz had pulled it. Little waves broke against its stern with a continual sobbing.

The great piazza lay cool in the gentle breeze. It was entirely deserted. From the north came a barely heard sucking and choking of the distant whirlpool. Zan Fadron thought of Thovas Tho, a gray cadaver, spinning round and round and

taking a last plunge. Perhaps the body was spinning at this moment, or would soon, or had. The promoter felt profoundly weary, old, burned out. He was turning south, with some vague intention of going back to his paddlewood and lying down, when he saw the bulk of Gogoma push out of the jungle toward the north. The high priest carried a basket on his great arm and Zan Fadron knew it held birds.

The caravanist was about to turn on away when the behemoth made a gesture asking him to wait. Zan Fadron walked over and leaned against one of the vast pilasters. The fat man waddled toward him with his breech clout entirely concealed in rolls of flesh. The blue heron feather fluttered in the breeze.

A disgust came over Zan Fadron at the thought of waiting and talking with the priest so soon after Thovas Tho's murder. He was about to go on after all, but a second thought came and told him that it had been war, that Gogoma was again in power, that he, Zan Fadron, was doomed to spend the remainder of his life on some sort of terms with the murderer. It was simply a question of policy. After all, the whole of life was a question of policy.

So Zan Fadron remained leaning against the pilaster, one foot cocked up against its cylindrical surface which was flat in relation to so tiny an object as a human figure. The fat man came up sweating profusely. He stopped with a slight gesture of salutation.

"A very pretty morning," he puffed and gave his head a shake that sent down a little rain of his sweat.

"You have a lot of birds."

"I got them off your limes, Gentlevir. You chose an admirable place." He looked up at the rim of the crater high above. "I wonder if your message will ever bring help?"

Zan Fadron did not look up. "I don't know. It doesn't make much difference."

The behemoth regarded him gravely out of pinpoint eyes set in the expanse of brown face. "You are thinking of your friend, Gentlesap."

"Certainly."

Gogoma meditated. "Well, it is true, it makes little difference who comes or goes. We are but scum caught in the Web of the Stars." He paused a time and finally added: "Still we try to hold our places."

The promoter stood moving his foot against the surface of the pilaster with a slight nervousness. The movement made about as much sound as the murmur of the whirlpool to the north. At last the caravaneer asked the question forever nibbling in his mind.

"How did you kill Thovas Tho in the net, Gogoma?"

The wide face was unmoved by so much as a quiver. "I did not kill him,

Gentlehomo.''

''Your men, then?''

''They had nothing to do with it, Gentlevir.''

Zan Fadron saw the priest meant to reveal nothing of the terrific mechanism of the net. There was no need trying to probe by indirection, for Zan Fadron already sensed the behemoth's mind was subtler than his own. To his surprise the priest proceeded.

''Had Gentlevir Thovas Tho greased his hands and feet he could have walked on the net without fear of sticking. That is the method we priests use in collecting our alms. It is a great miracle. The people flock to see it. It refreshes their faith in other things they know nothing about''

Zan Fadron was moved to smile, but his smile flickered out in the aura of Thovas Tho's death.

''It really helps prove those things, Gentlevir,'' proceeded the priest gravely. ''Belief in the Stars is the truth for my people; without it they could not exist.''

Zan Fadron leaned against the pilaster musing and presently said: ''I dare say that's right. Religious truth is any theory with sufficient coherence to satisfy man's inquisitiveness, and yet at the same time offering him sufficient inducement to bear the ills of life.''

The behemoth opened his slit-like eyes. Like all men, he was vastly impressed with the promoter's wisdom because he had repeated his own theory in slightly different words.

''Gentlevir, you are the ool I have been praying to come to Botomatl.''

Zan Fadron regarded him curiously.

''You must become high priest in the temple of the Stars.''

Zan Fadron did not know whether this were a jest or not.

''I am in earnest, Gentlehomo. I have prayed for such a man. None of my acolytes can take my place. Neither Jagala nor Quiz-Quiz. They do not comprehend that the temple is for man and man for the temple. Until you came, I was the only skeptic, the only disbeliever in Botomatl. I alone could administer the holy rites purely for the benefit of my people, without the corruption of faith or credulity or idolatry or useless sacrifice.''

''You really want me to become high priest?''

''Indeed I do!''

Zan Fadron stood staring at this monstrous proposal, and yet as he thought it over, he perceived that its monstrosity was really superficial. Back of it lay a genuine love for his people. Nor were Gogoma's motives entirely without parallel in Zan Fadron's own experience. In Lapis Lazuli Zan Fadron recalled conversations with ministers who frankly admitted that while, personally, they did not accept all

the tenets of their churches, still they preached them to their congregations, because the business man, the professional, the darkoid miner, the man around town were not prepared to receive the recondite learning of the study.

Also he had heard laymen admit that they could not allow their minister to know exactly what they believed because he led too secluded a life to receive the full glare of truth such as they found in the market place. Such stewardship of spiritual values always impressed Zan Fadron as a beautiful and a thoughtful attitude.

Now he was a little surprised to find himself shocked over the same condition in Botomatl. Moreover, the notion began to appeal to him. It touched the streak of romance, of playacting that had always lain at his heart. It promised his life a certain dramatic completion; high priest, hierophant in the hugest and most ornate temple of any known-to-him darkoid.

"Would it be necessary for me to become an acolyte until your death?"

The high priest raised a pulpy protesting hand. "You will be installed at once, within a week. I wish to retire and devote the remainder of my life to my own immortality, brother."

The promoter looked at him curiously.

The high priest touched the brightly colored birds in his basket.

"Immortal? The birds?"

"Gentlesap," intoned the high priest solemnly, "only one thing is immortal on Yoovellus, and that is beauty. Our philosophies change with the years; history is a forgetting; science is man's last guess; but a work of beauty, Gentlevir, lives on and on. It is immortal."

Zan Fadron had never before seen the high priest aroused.

"What do you do?" he asked curiously.

"I paint with feathers."

"Did you do the tapestry in your audience chamber?"

"That was my master Valhue's work. If you love color and forms, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, if a rainbow formed in your mind when you were a fetus, before you were foaled, then come." He started moving his bulk impulsively toward the great entrance, then hesitated and stopped. It was the only impulsive movement Zan Fadron ever saw him commit.

He reconsidered.

"No, there will be time after you become the high priest, brother. We will hurry and ordain you high priest tomorrow or the next day, but, Gentlehomo, to look at my picture, you should have preparation, you should fast and pray."

Sweat dripped from Gogoma under his emotion. A condition of the priesthood suddenly came into the caravaneer's mind. "Didn't you tell me, Gogoma,"

he asked suddenly, "the priests were not allowed to marry?"

"Yes, Gentlevir." Then the fat man interpreted the look that crossed Zan Fadron's face and went on persuasively: "Gentlesap, what a man loves in a woman is her liveliness. Touch it, and it wilts like a flower, but, Gentlevir, if... if you could hold the woman you love in perpetual youth, then, then," the behemoth held up his finger and spread his pinpoint eyes, "then, your love becomes immortal. She becomes part of your immortal idea, and the sense of sight is the sense of touch infinitly refined."

This last, uttered in a tone of revelation, meant nothing at all to the promoter. So, he decided to change the subject: "Gogoma, you haven't told me which species of zenoc your master belongs to. Is your master a winged ool?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny whether the master is winged. The master's self-made rules decree death for anyone who becomes informed of the identity of the master's species, unless, of course, one is an ordained priest."

Zan Fadron took his foot down from the pilaster and moved southward toward Tilita.

"After all, I can not become ordained as high priest, Gogoma; I shall marry. Not immediately, not so soon after Thovas Tho's death, but I shall marry."

Signs of animation faded from Gogoma's bulk. He fell in at Zan Fadron's side and waddled in unison to his step. Dwarfed by their surroundings, the two ools moved southward across the vast piazza. On his homeward walk, Thovas Tho's tragedy re-enveloped Zan Fadron. The promoter attempted to free himself of it. Part of him told himself he had not loved the colporteur, but another part of himself disputed this. They were just barely friends; they had almost never agreed on any point, and finally had quarreled and separated. But his sense of personal loss continued. Somehow Thovas Tho's taking-away changed the whole atmosphere of Botomatl for him. The colporteur had somehow spread an air of ordinariness, a feeling of the conventional moral values over the whole crater. Now Zan Fadron felt adrift.

As he approached the baobab the odor of garlic and pepper drifted to his nostrils through the jungle. When he stepped into the clearing he saw old Prymoxl stirring at a huge pot on her oven, while nearby lay heaps of zenoc fruits and zenoc vegetables, as well as some plantains, guavas, palm cabbages and red bananas. On the other side stood calabashes of palm wine and cow-tree milk. The tang of wine, fruit, and pepper smelled like a banquet.

Zan Fadron stood in the edge of the open space looking at these preparations when the crone saw him. She proved in the height of good spirits. All her bedraggled gaiety had returned. She gave a little croak of pleasure at seeing Zan Fadron, dropped her work and bundled over to embrace and kiss her future son-in-law. The embrace was close and pervasive. Zan Fadron could feel the dry

wrinkles of her lips, her flaccid dugs and her protuberant abdomen. Her breath stank of wine and garlic. For the first time, the caravaneer realized that his mother-in-law was merely an old Outoolian slattern living in a tree. Thovas Tho's death, somehow, had given him this new depressing objectivity. The colporteur was no longer in existence to rate the old slattern as an immortal soul on equality with Zan Fadron and himself.

Prymoxl patted the agent gleefully on the back. "Well, son-in-law-to-be, he is dead!"

The caravanist nodded mechanically.

"Wasn't it droll? Died on the very spot where my babies were lifted to the Stars. After he had worried my heart out of me! Well, it proves the Star God, Pachacamac, is stronger than his Forerunner Gods and my babies are safe." She cackled maliciously at this vindication of her faith.

The promoter released himself gently. "Your babies are quite safe, Gentlefem."

"And he will no longer oppose your marriage with my Tilita?"

"No. He is gone."

"And good riddance!" The grimalkin padded back to her work well content. Her babies were safe; her daughter was about to be married; her religion had triumphed; old Prymoxl's universe was again pat. She took a gourd of palm wine and sipped it with a smacking.

"Well," she soliloquized, "he who mocks the Star Gods mocks himself. Old Gogoma taught me that when I was just a little toddler." Here she smacked complacently and recalled another cliche: "The Star Gods give us life, and if we do not serve them they take our life away, eh primo?" She drained off her gourd, and began a great stirring.

There was something supremely ironic in this old baggage repeating with such gusto the high priest's veiled cynicisms. By good fortune she dropped into her more usual strain. "Ah, well, I shall have a fine son-in-law, and he will get me a fine grandson to hold on my knees, as white as my Lapis-Lazulian ancestors; perhaps two; perhaps three; perhaps the priests will allow all of Tilita's babies to remain here in Botomatl. They have enough in the Stars, Gentlevir, quite enough."

The palm wine was making her optimistic. She looked around at Zan Fadron in the midst of her garrulity.

"Why, what is the matter?" she cried amazed, "This is a fine way for my soon-to-be son-in-law to look when he is about to be married."

The agent realized that his face betrayed the horror with which the old woman's words had filled him. Only her gabbling had brought to him personally the abomination of this Star-worship, that his own children, the fruit of his and Tilita's love would be... .

"What is it? What is it?" cried the ancient one in growing alarm. She dipped her gourd and shuffled toward him, spilling wine as she came. She gave the gourd of wine to him and watched him drink it with satisfaction.

"Holy Pachacamac, but you are not at all happy for a bridegroom, Gentlehomo. Are you not ill?"

He denied illness, and when she pressed him to know what was the matter, he hesitated for an explanation that would conceal his thoughts: "Gogoma has asked me to become the high priest."

The old woman stepped back. Her mouth dropped open.

"The high priest!"

"Yes, Gentlehomo."

"But... but a priest can not marry... ." Her voice was an aspirate.

"No."

"Then, then my daughter, my little Tilita... ." Her words wavered off. Zan Fadron saw that she was about to fall into the shocking grief of the aged. He put an arm around her.

"It's just an offer, Gentlefem; just a proposition."

The old baggage stood staring up at him, drawing short uneven breaths. "Oh, Gentlevir, my daughter, my little baby... ." Her fine old eyes grew dark and fear-struck.

"Merely a proposal, Gentlefem, a tender, an overture," he repeated emptily.

The old woman looked around her with dazed eyes at the boiling pot, piles of fruit, and jars of drink. The caravaneer stood for a space and then, in exquisite discomfort, he touched his hat, wished her a "Good Day" and moved away toward his paddlewood on self-conscious legs. When a turn in the Hopeless jungle mercifully shielded him from Prymoxl's eyes, the caravanist paused to wipe his face. He was surprised at the finality the old woman had construed into his first hint that he should become a priest of the Stars. He had not realized how mandatory in the lives of the Outools was the slightest suggestion from the temple.

As he walked slowly toward his tree home, a curious thought came to him: Had Thovas Tho lived and completed his revolution, he, Zan Fadron, could have married Tilita with a clear heart, since Thovas Tho could be the high priest. He began to suspect that he had lost far more than the rebel army in the colporteur's death.

When Zan Fadron reached the paddlewood, he saw Solgat Sol seated just outside his cubicle on one of the little benches cleaning his needler. The Darkool from the darkoid Horgadil had the needler in pieces beside him wiping each piece with a greasy rag. As he wiped, he whistled daintily and now and then he lifted and squinted through the barrel to admire the shine of its rifling. His wrists were

still ringed with blue bruises where he had been tied.

The caravaneer nodded to the gallant without speaking and walked on into Thovas Tho's cubicle. The Horgadilian watched him and called after him cheerfully: "I've taken everything Gentlehomo Thovas Tho had of value, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, to pay for my grimposauri."

Sure enough the colporteur's packs lay scattered here and there in the cubicle, quite gutted. Catechisms and his private papers were flung over the nipa matting. Among this wreckage, Zan Fadron saw the bundle of letters which Thovas Tho had written to his wife, Ludia Faba. The promoter picked these up together with one of the Catechisms.

Solgat Sol continued talking cheerfully through the thin partition. "You can't fancy my surprise, Gentlevir, when I looked down, and saw he was gone. I was quite startled, and I assure you, Gentlehomo, it requires no small thing to startle Gentlesap Solgat Sol.

The agent slipped these keepsakes of the dead man into his pockets with some vague idea of forwarding them to Ludia Faba. There was something pathetic in the worn little Catechism which Thovas Tho had toiled to bring to Botomatl.

"And do you know, Gentlevir, I've wondered what could have whisked a man away like that when he was stuck so tight; and think, there was absolutely nowhere for him to go, and he went so quickly. I'm a hard man to puzzle, Gentlesap, but this puzzles me."

Zan Fadron came out buttoning the flaps of his pockets. The muleteer looked up curiously.

"It's a Catechism and a package of letters."

The muleteer nodded.

"The reason I took everything Gentlevir Thovas Tho had," re-explained Solgat Sol apologetically, "is because I need it and you don't, Gentlevir Zan Fadron. As a rule I act generously, but now I cannot. In the war you played the wise part, a friend to both sides, but I made enemies of both sides," he shrugged lightly, "quite declasse."

"What are you going to do?" asked Zan Fadron curiously.

The Horgadilian began reassembling the needler with the expertness of much practice. "I will try to get what I want, Gentlehomo." He glanced at Zan Fadron with a smile that lifted his glossy mustache and showed his thick red lips. He arose, drew some greasy needle-cartridges from his greasy pockets and clicked them into the needler.

"Solgat Sol," said Zan Fadron gloomily, "you are going to get yourself thrown into the net after all."

The muleteer laughed aloud. "My dear comrade, to hear us talk anyone would

think I was the bridegroom and you the unhappy suitor. I swear you haven't the face of a man who will act as bridegroom to the sweetest girl in Botomatl tonight.''

''I'm not.''

''Not what?''

''Not going to marry Tilita tonight.''

Solgat Sol paused in addressing his needler. ''You are not going to marry Tilita tonight?''

''No.''

''You—are—not—going—to—marry—Tilita—tonight?'' he spaced his words with blank incredulity.

The caravaneer made a gesture.

''Why not?''

The Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent stood looking at his muleteer. ''Well, I'll tell you. You're the only ool of the expedition I can tell since he's gone. There's more than one reason. Firstly I've been having a very troubling recurring dream. I'm deeply in love with the girl in this dream. I know how insane that sounds. She has blond hair. I can never quite make out the details of her face. She's somehow associated with time or at least with two clocks. One clock's hands are always moving clockwise; the other's always counterclockwise. Something undefinable in my monogamous subconscious causes me to be unable to love another woman, not even innocent sweet Tilita.

Secondly, it's this Star-worship stuff. It's merely a system of infanticide and child enslavement. Why, Solgat Sol, this damned place is simply a huge baby farm! It's hellish, it's diabolical, it... .'' He broke off with a shudder and stood staring.

The Horgadilian was nodding a courteous. ''Yes, Gentlevir,'' at each of these denunciations. Now at the interruption he waited a moment and finally prompted amiably: ''But you haven't said why you weren't going to marry, Gentlesap.''

Zan Fadron looked at him, and came to himself. ''What?''

''Why aren't you going to marry?''

''Blessed Void, do you think I could marry in such a hole as this?''

The muleteer stared blankly, but presently ejaculated: ''Oh, no, no, certainly not.''

''You wouldn't, would you?''

''If, if somebody else... er... killed the babies.''

''Somebody else?''

''The priests, didn't you say?''

The two ools stood staring at each other, both completely at sea. The

Horgadilian finally said, "Anyway, you are not going to marry Tilita tonight?"

"No, I am going to the temple."

Solgat Sol nodded solemnly. "We are much alike, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron; that is what I would do." He pondered a moment; then for some reason drew out his needler again and carefully removed the needle cartridges from the chamber, one by one. He placed the needler in one pocket, the cartridges in another, touched his hat and moved off toward the baobab. Before he was out of sight, he broke into his airy whistling again and did a little skip-step, like a boy impatient for some sport.

While Zan Fadron talked to Solgat Sol, he had decided to become a priest of the Stars. Something within himself had determined to seek cloistration in the teocalla. What it was that determined, when it had determined, the promoter did not know. The decision had come to pass in the blind alleys of his subconsciousness.

The first hint the ool received was when he spoke tentatively to old Prymoxl. Now he had announced a definite decision to Solgat Sol. He walked back into his cubicle and began packing his bags with a kind of thirst for the quiet and abnegation of the temple. As he packed, the surroundings of the Hopeless paddlewood brought Thovas Tho before his mind. He thought of how he had run after the short ool for their talk, of how Thovas Tho had warned him against idolatrous women, and had prayed that he should never marry Tilita. His present action and that prayer were a last strange coincidence.

Just around in the southern cubicle lay scattered Thovas Tho's Catechisms where they perhaps could lie and mold until time and insects reduced them to dust. This was the outcome of a squatter's gratitude to a God or Gods for the law of adverse possession at Thovas Tho Mine, Darkoid, Fligsid; this pitiful sacrifice for a callous muleteer.

Zan Fadron was stowing away the last of his things when he heard a step outside, and then a little gasp. He straightened with the deliberation of twenty-five years and saw Tilita standing with his dinner in the starbeams of the entrance. She seemed breathless from hurrying, and now stood looking at him with frightened eyes. She put the platter on the table mechanically, and then stood mute, regarding first the ool, then his packed bags.

The caravaneer remained motionless with the peculiar, outspread, hanging hands of a man who is caught under suspicious circumstances. Mentally he blasphemed that he had packed his bags so hastily. He should have let the girl come and go. The packed bags advertised his decision. In fact, they shouted it without finesse. He had meant to consult with Tilita, to win her over gently, but his packed bags damned him.

She moistened her lips. "My mother told me that perhaps... ." Her composure

which depended on her silence failed on this sentence. She began another. "I r-ran all the way. I... I was afraid you would b... be gone... ."

Suddenly she dropped to her knees with her arms across the platter.

"Oh, oh, primo!" she sobbed. "Th-this was our w-wedding supper." She lay sobbing violently with her arms stretched among the fruits and wine and bowls that were meant to grace her wedding feast.

Zan Fadron crossed to her with a melting pity. He wrapped her in his arms. "Oh, Tilita, beautiful, hush, don't cry, sweetheart."

He was patting her cheek; he lifted her blue-black hair and pressed his lips to the whiteness of her neck. The smell of her hair, the spice of the wine and the soft rondures of her form filled Zan Fadron with the vastness of his resignation.

One lobe of his brain set up a desperate pleading for this luscious woman; another began framing some excuse that would protect her from the devastating knowledge that had come to him. The old excuse of religion came to his mind, that mental buffer to interpose before the edge of reality. He tried to think of something useful from his knowledge of science and theology.

"Tilita, an ool's religious duty should come first of all.

"Tilita, both of us owe our lives to Pachacamac who made us.

"Tilita, both of us will live forever as bride and groom in the bright mansions of the Stars."

With long sighs, the ool mouthed the old, old clichés. The ashes, the emptiness of it filled his mouth with soap and salt. He encircled her breasts and face with his arms and pressed his face to hers. He could feel her wet cheeks against his.

"Oh, Tilita, Tilita," he shuddered.

His pain brought the girl some self control. She began mothering him and lifted herself, and partially lifted him. She stood with a wet face, with one arm around his neck, and one hand on his breast. She glanced down at her platter, and lowered an arm to offer him some wine. Her arm bent a little backward and dimpled at the elbow, with the soft flexibility of a woman's arm. Every move she made wrought upon the priest within him. He wondered desperately if it would be possible for them to live childless in Botomatl, but her very wealth of charm jeered at him. Her babies would be as dimpled and lovely as she. He could not touch the wine. They went together slowly to the hammock and sat.

She was so miserable that Zan Fadron prevailed upon her to lie at full length and he sat at the slenderness of her waist. They remained thus in silence, and presently the strange comfort that lovers give each other crept slowly over them both. It dulled their sadness. It hushed the trickle of minutes in a pool of timelessness.

The man looked sadly at the shadows about her eyes, at the little hollow at the base of her throat. Her hair seemed dark as if she were sick, and her eyes remained steadfastly on his. Presently she whispered with a faint smile that she had prayed every evening since they first knelt by the Web of the Stars that he should come to believe in Pachacamac, and now he had. "I'll tell you a secret about Pachacamac if you promise me you will never tell anyone I told you," she whispered to him.

"I promise," he whispered in return.

"One day, long before you came here, I quietly sneaked up behind Gogoma and Quiz-Quiz and I listened to them talk about Pachacamac and other Star Gods. Gogoma was saying that the name "Pachacamac" was only a Botomatlian name, that Pachacamac was known to other Stars by a completely different name."

"What was the other name?"

"I don't know. Gogoma didn't say." Here she paused for a few seconds. "I shall become a vestal of the Stars," she told him.

Their mood fell into a sort of adagio. The flattery of the cloister came to Zan Fadron pensively. He thought of himself as high priest, and of vestals, unused, holding a sort of faint violet sweetness. The possibility of a sort of happiness began to limn itself even on the murderous background of Botomatl. No doubt that mood laid hold of the girl even more strongly, for she was a child with a child's dreaminess. He sat looking down at her, holding her hands, filled with her sweetness. Rays of the artificial light of his high beams shined around the inside of the paddlewood, and a pool of light wore slowly across the floor. The perfume of the Hopeless jungle breathed in upon them. A hummingbird droned above the cordage of the hammock, and at last, when the bed was made, it zinged away as if again the devil were in pursuit.

The girl's gaze grew dreamy. Her breathing became quite regular. Her eyes dropped. Her anxieties of the preceding days, the torments of a girl's first love, the sleepless and terrible night she had spent in the temple, all rushed upon her as she lay relaxed and at peace with the man she loved. She looked dewy in her sleep. Her eyes were like pale blue water-lilies above the crimson flowering of her lips. Now and then her fingers clutched Zan Fadron's at some impulse of her nerves. The caravanist realized that now would be the most painless time for him to go. He loosed his fingers gently from her hand; he lifted his weight carefully from the hammock and stood clear. It swung the hammock a little, but she slept with the limp soundness of thirteen.

The caravaneer stood looking down at her. Under his two-beams, the little cubicle seemed filled with light. Perfume was emanating from the sleeping girl. A great sadness came over the man. Had Thovas Tho lived, in this sweet flower garden he would have found rest and peace, the sweet communion of long nights and

tenderness by day.

He picked up his packs guardedly and for another moment hung looking at her with his burden. He was doing her a great, great kindness to preserve her beauty from the pain and murder of childbearing in Botomatl; he was doing her a great, great goodness to preserve her faith and to resign her heavy bosom to the chill purity of the temple. He hoped that this might be the great kindness and the great goodness of Zan Fadron's life.

On his way out, his eyes rested a moment on his untouched portion of the marriage feast.

CHAPTER 18

The chronic suppression of society prevents a man from bewailing his griefs openly and sanitarily. Probably ages of fighting and military training has taught the mind the wisdom of the generalissimo who stands off cool and collected, thinking what best may be done in the emergency, even while his army breaks and perishes.

Zan Fadron deliberately ceased thinking of the Botomatlian, Outoolian girl almost as soon as he left the paddlewood. He avoided things that would remind him of her. He made a quarter of a mile circuit through the steamy jungle around the baobab where Prymoxl still toiled at the wedding feast. He struck in toward the lake at an angle that would miss the cow-tree forest. His bags were heavy; the afternoon's atmosphere painfully oppressive and hot. The glare from his two-beams hurt his eyes, and he felt weary and old.

He kept his mind on the surface of things, so thinly on the surface of things that it was a sort of vacancy. When he looked at the Hopeless palm fronds at the reach of the lake toward the teocalla, these things simply were. With an effort he banished all mental association or aura of beauty. A cow must look at a landscape in some such fashion.

From the lake shore he saw some odd blue rolling clouds drift up out of the Mosaza Fault Line above the western rim of Botomatl. Under his two-beams, their blueness turned the sky above them to an indigo, and the palisades to a cardinal. His mind did not combine these three brilliancies into a harmony.

The hillock which hid the Web of the Stars lifted its mystery between him and the temple. His eyes rested upon it with a stunned ool's quietism. Only when he passed it and waded through the hot sand around the swing of the lake did the memory of Tilita assail him. In this blistering place he had kissed and embraced her. An ache struck through his mind, like the start of a broken tooth. The caravaneer made a harried movement. He swung his bags to his other shoulder and scrambled back to the surface of things.

He looked behind him. He looked at his chronometer. Day had begun an hour

and a half ago. A fisherman rowed his boat toward a reedy island. Far up the beach Zan Fadron could see the black dots of two human figures coming toward him. No doubt it was some of Thovas Tho's ools bringing a sacrifice to atone for their impiety.

So he walked on, considering Thovas Tho's murder very quietly, without the faintest condemnation or approval. It was war, a move in a chess game. The pawns of life took first this position and that. Thovas Tho was dead; he was stepping into the archiepiscopal chair; Gogoma would paint. It was a hot day.

Quiz-Quiz, the hunchback, stood at Solgat Sol's bolsa with its queer top where it lay at the edge of the piazza. Whether the acolyte were waiting for him or not, Zan Fadron did not know. The crooked little ool, Quiz-Quiz, took one of the bags and the two proceeded across the vast piazza that quivered in the heat.

The columns of the facade seemed to tremble. The hexagonal tufa blocks stung Zan Fadron's feet. The hot air stuck a hot brand to the back of his neck. Of volcanic origin, the underground rivers of magma provided heating to the crater of Botomatl that was a little too hot, at times, for human comfort, but it was bearable. The piazza seemed endless. The hunchback, Quiz-Quiz, piloted him toward the southern side entrance.

Halfway across the piazza the Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd. agent peered back through the flame of his two-beams. The distant figures had enlarged. They were almost to the net, and were running. With vast relief, Zan Fadron stepped out of the heat into the chilled hypogeum. Its gloom and chill fell like a lotion on his eyes. As he moved inside he thought he heard a distant shouting, or, more likely, it was some variation in the coughing and sucking of the whirlpool far to the north. The southern entrance led into a mere tunnel that penetrated inward twenty or thirty steps, then led into another tunnel that ran north and south at right angles. This passageway gave on an endless row of cenobitic cells parallel with the cliff outside.

The temple of the Stars in Botomatl was probably the most populous group of cenobitic cells known in human history, darkoid or planetary. Twenty-two hundred and sixty-five cells honeycombed the cliff. The whole object of this vast institution was to reduce the birth rate of the imprisoned nation by celibacy, before the arrival of the zenoc warlord, Pachacamac.

The hunchback led the way to one of these cells, put Zan Fadron's bag inside, glanced about for a moment to see that everything was in order, then explained that this would be the novitiate's room and retired.

The promoter walked inside and stood looking about him. A hole through ten feet of stone permitted the rays of light from his high-beams to exit the chamber. The only furnishing was a sort of stone couch or table. The walls of the cell were roughly hewn, but the surface of the couch was not only polished, but into it was

worn the impression of a human form. How many anchorites for how many centuries had stretched themselves on it to hard repose?

Zan Fadron put his bags in a corner next to two large baskets, and stood looking around the expressionless hole. He looked down at the contents of the two baskets. One was almost completely filled with bluish violet lapis Lazuli gemstones, for which Yoovellus' only spaceport had been named. The other large basket was almost full of gold nuggets. One nugget was as large as a man's head, providing evidence toward the credibility of Obmo Eno's tale.

His gaze turned elsewhere. The floor, also, was worn into distinct grooves by the tramping of feet. The thought of such a stream of life eddying out of the warmth of the crater to stagnate in this chilled hole oppressed Zan Fadron. To what dull end they had gravitated.

The caravanist sat down on his couch and looked at his bags. He did not open them, nor make any of those little arrangements of housekeeping which an ool performs even to camp for a night. It seemed not worth while. Indeed, the mental basis of every home-keeping gesture in man is a mate and children. By his desertion of Tilita, this had been torn from Zan Fadron's brain.

So he sat on the couch in silence. Under high-beam, the air shaft gave a yellowish circle of light on the opposite wall. It showed the grain of the volcanic stone. Presently the promoter became aware of a faint odor of the cow-tree milk in the close air. Zan Fadron straightened and savored the air almost in surprise. It was the odor of milk. Then he realized that the scent of Tilita's body had clung to his clothes.

It annoyed Zan Fadron sharply. A vision of the girl asleep in the hammock passed before his eyes. He shook his shoulders sharply, got up, walked over to the air shaft and looked out. Under a two-beamed gaze, the shaft gave on a circle of saffronish-black western sky. The caravaneer stood breathing at the intake, thinking he should have changed his clothing. His hardly suppressed thoughts began breaking in on his brain. He could see her asleep in the hammock. On his fingers he could feel the warmth where her hands had clung. It seemed that he had, at that very moment, stepped away from her side.

He let his curbed imagination go. He wondered wistfully if she were still asleep; and what would she do when she awoke? Go back to the baobab? Back to old Prymoxl and the empty wedding feast? What a raw, lonely vigil the night would bring her! Had Thovas Tho lived, what rapture Zan Fadron and Tilita would have known together!

A pulse began throbbing in his neck. He could feel a faint warm line along the closure of his lips. Blood murmured in his ear. In the vast stillness of the cliff, he could hear the functioning of his heart. Its systole and diastole formed a gurgling that sounded almost like an external voice. He imagined it said his own name

over and over: "Gentlesap Zan Fadron! Gentlevir Zan Fadron! Gentlehomo Zan Fadron!" It might have been Tilita's voice repeating the watery syllables interminably. As the ool sat listening, the faint calling seemed to detach itself from the murmur in his ears. It seemed to come from the corridor. It was distinctly from the corridor, far down toward the south, in the opposite direction from the entrance.

That any person should be whispering his name in this distant wing of the hypogeum amazed Zan Fadron. He went out into the passageway. He could not see beyond fifteen or twenty doors owing to the curve of the passage. But the whispering of his name came closer and closer. It sounded as if some spectral voice were moving through solid stone from cell to cell calling him. It was impossible to say whether it was a man's or a woman's. Now it was only a few doors above him. The corridor remained empty. The voice passed into an adjoining cell. Suddenly it was in his own cell. The caravanist wheeled back inside.

"What is it?" he asked of emptiness. Then he saw that his air-shaft was darkened. He stepped to his shaft, looked through and saw the Horgadilian's face at the other end. The man's eyes were staring.

"By the Shadows of the Void!" gasped the fellow, "I thought I'd never find you. The girl, Tilita... you're a priest... perhaps you can... ."

Solgat Sol's excitement communicated itself to the neophyte: "What is it?" he asked sharply. "What's happened to her? Answer me, ool!" A sudden premonition roughened his skin.

The Horgadilian suddenly lifted his voice to a whispered wail: "Oh, Merciless Void! She's in the net! Jumped in! Run! Oh, Blessed Void, Gentlevir, run!"

Zan Fadron whirled. As he rushed out of his cell, he still heard that wailing whisper pursuing him: "Run! Run! Oh, Blessed Void!"

Quiz-Quiz was at the door. Two or three priests were flying northward down the corridor that led toward the main temple. Zan Fadron shouted at the hunchback to open the door. The crooked little man began pointing and screaming for Zan Fadron to run with the other priests; to grease his feet. The caravaneer stormed the door through which he had entered. He flung his weight against the bolts. They clashed back. The portal inched open. Quiz-Quiz clamored a warning as Zan Fadron shot through the opening. Furnace-like heat and a blare of golden reflections of light from his two-beams smote the troglodyte as he leaped out of the cavern. He switched from two-beams to low-beams. Solgat Sol was waiting, quivering at the entrance. At sight of Zan Fadron he whirled and bolted across the wide pavement. He began explaining in staccato: "Motherless Void! Quiz-Quiz wouldn't let me in! I had to shout in a thousand windows! She must be swallowed up, gone... ."

He tore along through the heat. The Horgadilian panted after him. A hot breeze beat against the agent's face; his heart pounded. The piazza was so huge his feet

seemed to patter up and down in one place. Solgat Sol gradually crept up on him.

By the time they reached the bolsa at the edge of the piazza, the muleteer was abreast. He drew out his needler and stuck it butt foremost to the flying promoter. Zan Fadron got it without breaking his stride.

Beyond the pavement, the sand slowed him up. His feet slipped, his boots filled. Both men were reduced to a miserable trot. Zan Fadron stared ahead through his dripping sweat. He recognized a particular Constellation that was just sinking behind the western palisade. It was the hour of sacrifice, when things flung into the net vanished. With a last effort the caravanist plowed up the mound, gasping for breath.

In the limed circle lay the female Outool. At the sound of Zan Fadron's sobbing breath she turned her head, saw him and screamed, "Primo!"

She struggled violently to loose herself. The man plunged down the stones toward her. At that moment a section of the landward stones opened. Something huge, leggy, and bristly flashed out. Its eight spindling legs covered a twenty foot circle, its body was a thick disc-shaped form mottled with spots the size of a man's head. The spots were a deeper darker black color than the deep dark black between the spots. Each spot appeared to be of nonflexible material, whereas the area between the spots looked to be flexible. In a sort of spiked plate on the front of its cephalothorax were mounted two of its eight staring deep dark black eyes. The complete cephalothorax was borne on the huge spiky legs at about the height of a man's head.

The thing flashed on the girl with a sort of rubbery snap. It caught her on the movable spikes of its frontal plate, gripped her in its mandibles, and next moment flashed back. It was so swift, so silent, so horrible, Zan Fadron had neither time nor mind to raise his needler. A mere stab, a flash and the net hung empty save for the girls's clothes still sticking to the limed cords.

The caravaneer climbed down to the net shakily, like an old man. He set his feet on the cords and moved carefully around the limed center toward the unstable stones. He heard Solgat Sol shouting at him from the hillock.

What he pushed was not a stone but a sort of silken flap that swung back easily. Inside it was dark. He switched from low-beam to high-beam. He could see only the white blur of the girl, and the glint of eyes, such as he had seen on the rim of the crater. He drew out his electric torch with queer deliberation and switched it on. Under its spurt, the cavern glowed all over with a pale sheen. It was lined with silk. The place stunk of rotting flesh.

Under the hard light of the electric torch, the creature gave the girl's body a delicate kiss, a mere touch with a hairlike lancet that slipped into the lower margin of her right breast over her heart. At the touch, the girl curved up her body, her right arm dropped among the spikes on the frontal plate, her left swung limply

down.

Zan Fadron decided to risk a shot to the spider's eyes above Tilita's body. He started to raise his needler and was suddenly viciously attacked from each side by two winged men. One winged man grabbed his left wrist in an unbreakable grip. The second winged vampire grabbed his needler which he had held in his right hand, yanking it loose from his grip. A third winged ool, this time a female, rushed in and delivered a powerful blow to his chin, dazing him.

During the scuffle, the monster vanished and reappeared sticking to the silken roof over the caravaneer's head. Its great disc-shaped body hung downward from the spread of its legs. The reddish-white body of the girl was still in its mandibles. Still dazed, the promoter struggled to break free of the three vampires. His electric torch had fallen to the floor at his feet. Suddenly down through the electric glare fell coils of shining viscid cables. They fell in a sort of horrible shimmering beauty around his neck, arms, and legs. He could see the stuff spewing out of eight spinnerets at the end of the abdomen.

The winged woman had backed away. The other two vampires each had pulled hard on each of his wrists, in opposite directions, so that the webbing descended upon him without touching the vampires. He looked up into the downpour of limed silk. Then the vampires let go of him and stepped back away. In the same instant, Tilita's body fell from the roof to the silken floor. The monster itself vanished, along with all three of the winged ools. Amid the gummy silk, Zan Fadron contrived to grab his electric torch and to twist the light this way and that. The cavern was empty of the monster. The thing had escaped with such suddenness his eyes did not register the motion. The three vampires had departed as well, but not nearly as fast.

The sound of voices, the flare of torches, and rays of high-beams, came from the further end of the cavern and presently Gogoma and four other priests of the Stars appeared crawling out of the end of a tunnel which evidently connected with the temple.

The naked behemoth glanced about, then waddled over the silken carpet to the woman's limp form. In the flare of the torches and high-beams, he balanced his bulk carefully, stooped, and lifted the stiffly flexuous figure. He straightened it and laid it across the sweating expanse of his chest and shoulder. He stroked her curves with puffy fingers in profound satisfaction. After a moment he thought to ask: "I hope you are not injured Gentlehomo, Zan Fadron?"

The promoter made some answer amid his smother of limed tubes. Two of the priests ran over and began stripping the viscous stuff from his body with their greased hands.

"In your zeal to save the girl from being consumed, Gentlevir Zan Fadron," purred the high priest, "I hope you have not caused her to be imperfectly anes-

thetized and preserved.''

The agent made no answer. The words Gogoma used seemed to mean nothing.

''This body,'' proceeded the high priest, ''will be a rare addition to my gallery.'' From a pocket, Gogoma removed a very small device, about the size of a small coin. He placed it under her hair, on top of her head, in the very center. Then he lifted the girl's body up into the air. When Tilita's head was about a foot from the ceiling, Gogoma completely let go of her body. It hung in midair. Because of his experiences working as an agent of Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., Zan Fadron knew exactly what type of device Gogoma had employed. It was a device widely used in the slave trade. The coin-like device, when activated, produced two tractor beams, one upward and one downward. The upward tractor beam gripped and held the ceiling. The downward tractor beam gripped and held her body.

''Pachacamac's injection has placed her body in a catatonic state of semi-paralysis. Thus the body can be flexed and poised in a desired posture. Then we place the body into stasis which freezes the body into said desired posture. After all, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, we will preserve the immortal part of this girl, her beauty, this sweet modeling of flesh. That is what all men love in a woman, Gentlesap Zan Fadron, beauty. The lover clasps beauty in his arms and it vanishes even while it lies upon his heart. But the artist, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron, ah, the artist really enjoys his love for decades or even centuries, depending on how long the artist lives and wishes.

''With his eye, that subtle sense of touch, infinitely refined, the artist embraces the whole woman in a sort of kissing gaze. How gross the passion of a lover, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, how cool and sublimated the rapture of an artist. Beauty is the thought of each and every God. In the temple we will return thanks reverently for this little sleepy flower.''

Again he stroked her rondures with swollen fingers, until one of the other priests informed him that Zan Fadron was free of the webbing. Gogoma nodded, encircled one elephantine arm around Tilita's waist, and reached up with the other hand to turn off the upward tractor beam. Thus her body was loose from the ceiling. Carrying the body, he departed the room. Zan Fadron and the others followed close behind.

The priests were making their way back through the tunnel to the Temple of the Stars. They came out in a great chamber into which, under low-beam, the rays of a certain Constellation fell through a huge rose window. Opposite the window was a rayed plate of burnished gold. Night-vision high-beams falling on this mirror filled the chamber with an eerie fulgor.

The apartment was lined on all sides with a brilliant tapestry of featherwork.

The vivid green of parrots vibrated against the lory's yellow. The crimson of a hummingbird's throat contrasted against the cream of a pelican. Such an irisated palette no paint ever produced. Zan Fadron scrutinized the images in the tapestry. The picture was of a rising star spreading its web of light-rays. In its shining gossamer were woven animals, trees, insects, naked men and women, zenocs, robots, androids, cyborgs, babies, spiders, loathsome worms, et cetera. On the right wall the shining starbeams raveled out into a myriad of human and zenoc shapes, belly-gods gorging, warriors slaughtering, lovers embracing, lawmakers judging, thieves stealing, murderers stabbing, and yet it was all starbeams. The whole vital realm, the artist was saying, is nothing but a rainbow froth of love, lust, rapine pain, weariness, joy and ecstasy where starbeams impinge on matter. All of it is somehow bound up in starlight, and then spun out of the Web of the Stars.

In the center of the room knelt the naked forms of Tilita's grandmother and of the colporteur. The grandmother did not look like the usual grandmother. She was svelte and beautiful. Her Outoolian sensuousness and the Fligsidian's powerful physique and hard face formed a subtle harmony with the figures in the featherwork. Thovas Tho's scroll of polished black hair was still intact. On the other side of the revivalist, old Gogoma arranged Tilita's body in an attitude of adoration. Then he activated the upward tractor beam. This time her feet were touching the floor, even though the beam reached forth from the top of her head to grip and hold the ceiling. From another pocket, Gogoma pulled another small device. It, too, was about the size of a small coin. Zan Fadron instantly knew what it was. It was another device widely used in the slave trade. Gogoma placed it under her hair beside the first device, snapped part of it into the first device, and then he switched it on. Tilita was now in stasis. Not even a strong man could bend her joints now. She was frozen into the posture that Gogoma had formed with the care of a skilled sculptor.

She was in a form of suspended animation known as "standard slave stasis" or "Workinski stasis" named for its inventor. It was different from and much cheaper than null tau. It did not freeze time as did null tau. A body under Workinski stasis aged one day in every hundred years.

Zan Fadron stood looking at the three figures kneeling to the golden image of a Star. Their bodies were preserved, their hearts barely beat in the immortality of standard slave stasis. They would almost never die; they would almost never live. For centuries, their bodies would persist on and on, exactly as if they were netted in the spider's web, waiting for a return of the monster to suck out their juices. Of course, at any time in the future, if their stasis type was changed to null tau, then they would age not even one day in an eternity of stasis.

Zan Fadron wondered dully if any consciousness lay behind their slow-bat-

ting eyes. If they felt pain or discomfort or nothing. He could see that someone, perhaps Gogoma, had feather-painted the body of Tilita's grandmother. No wonder he had previously thought she was a statue. As Zan Fadron marched out with the other priests, a curious fear assailed him. He was afraid that a rat might gnaw on Tilita in the night.

CHAPTER 19

At some time during the night, he dreamed his old recurring dream, and then awoke with a sudden odd compulsion. He felt the urge to skinny dip in the lake. Perhaps the refreshment of the lake's waters would cause the solution of his whole career in Botomatl to become clear to Zan Fadron. The promoter stood up and began to pace to and fro. He paused in his pacing in front of the air-shaft in gray relief. It was very simple.

On low-beam, the shaft itself was now a small circular blur in the utter blackness of his cell. As Zan Fadron paused at the end of the intake, the welcome smell of wet jungle flowers breathed in upon him.

He turned his night-vision completely off. It felt nice to rest his eyes. For a moment the agent stood reckoning the position of his bags, but as he started to move toward them, he had a sudden premonition that he would not need them again. The thought brought a passing sense of queerness. Always he had carried his bags; how could he possibly ever not need them? It seemed strange to think that he was perhaps about to walk away and never come back for the leather cases stacked in the corner of his crypt.

He moved carefully toward the door, holding out his arms, fingers spread. When finally he touched the wall, he did not find the door where he thought it should be. But at last he found it, passed through and began feeling his way down the long curving passage of the hypogeum. The turn of the corridor was at a greater distance than he had expected, but after that he got quickly to the door. His management of the bolts a few hours before aided him in the blackness and a few moments later he drew the great shutters a little apart. He could hear the winds of a raging storm outside. He could hear the lake's waves pound the beach. No wonder he had smelled wet jungle flowers. A current of spray drifted in out of the night, and eerie wind-sounds whispered in the black ear of the teocalla. A violent atmospheric storm had descended on Botomatl.

Zan Fadron shivered at the thought of exposing himself to the storm at night. He felt an impulse to return to his cell for his poncho and hat, and then he reflected that he would remove both before he entered the water, and that they would lie on the edge of the beach all night in the pounding waves and mist. Oddly enough, the thought of leaving a soaked coat and a shapeless hat was distasteful to the caravanist.

He closed the portals softly behind him, paused for a moment in the recessed arch of the entrance, and then stepped out into the savage wind and fierce mist. The drizzle chilled Zan Fadron, but it brought him a certain composure and sequence of thought that he had not known in his cell. The wide murmur of the storm filled the night, and through it he could hear the suck and gasp of the whirlpool in the north. That lullaby should soothe away his too constant thoughts. Refusing to turn on his night-vision apparati, he was determined to keep night, night, and to give his eyes a badly needed rest. He squinted hard, trying to see beyond the piazza toward the west, but he could see neither the sheen of the lake nor the pale narrowing of the river as it swung in toward the teocalla. He could not even make out the shimmer of the sand where he and Tilita had... the thought broke into a horrible jolt of pain.

Terrible waves of remorse hit him like the waves of the lake pounding the beach. Look at what he had done to poor innocent sweet Tilita. He had robbed her of her life. Depression and misery ate at his soul. For the first time in his life, Zan Fadron thought of killing himself. It would be the only just punishment for what he had done to Tilita. He could throw himself into the whirlpool. That would do it. He began walking towards it.

The strangeness of what he was about to do gradually grew on Zan Fadron. It seemed amazing that presently he, by his own will, would flicker out like a picture on a screen. It seemed unbelievable that his own legs, his own eyes would guide themselves to nothingness. They had served him so long, and now they would turn traitor to themselves.

The lift and fall of his feet over the wet pavement; the play of his muscles under his soggy clothes; the trickle of water through his hair; the very functioning of his eyes in the gray night took on a sort of marvel. How strange that all this elaboration that moved and breathed and grieved could, in a moment, by its own will, become a stringing of mud and a blowing of dust! His death would be the strangest, the most enigmatic gesture of his life. Then a queer thought came; would blotting out despair ease it? In the shimmer of the lake he would find neither peace nor pain, nor the girl of his recurring dream; he would find nothing. Could becoming nothing rectify his wrong to Tilita? Could it rescue the dream-girl he loved from whatever held her imprisoned? His remorse was a kind of unbalanced force, and forces cannot be blotted; they can only be counteracted. Was it possible to pay for his sin toward Tilita? Would escaping his body somehow pay for his sin against her? Was it possible to pay for sin thus? Paying for sin thus was a sick man's notion, absurd, feverish. A shiver went over him.

The dark blur of Solgat Sol's bolsa still lay at the foot of the piazza. As Zan Fadron approached it, he heard a scraping and presently saw a movement in the mass of the boat. As he came closer, he saw it was a man bailing out the boat with

a calabash. The caravaneer walked on past the stranded bolsa into the water when Sol-gat Sol's voice called, "Is it you, Gentlevir?"

The caravaneer answered and paused at the depth of his knees.

"Blessed Void!" gasped the Horgadilian, "I thought you certainly were dead! They say no one in the history of Botomatl has survived the Web of the Stars! And you escaped the spider! You escaped. I saw you enter the spider's den. I heard no shots... ."

The promoter agreed wearily. "You see I'm out. I lost your needler. I'm sorry," he said, and he waded on into the river.

There was a pause; the muleteer came to the edge of the water and peered after the vanishing man. He cleared his throat, then called with a certain politeness through the fierce wind. "If you will wait a moment, Gentlehomo, I am going your way. We have been comrades all the way through, Gentlesap."

The agent peered at him through the gloom. "Do you mean then... ."

"Yes, Gentlehomo, and the whirlpool will be more dashing than still water, more fitting for adventurers."

"It's all the same, Solgat Sol."

"But, but, Gentlevir," pleaded the muleteer in a queer voice. "I hate going down alone. I hate it. I was standing here thinking, I will tell you. I meant to take the girl down with me in this bolsa. Ah, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron, that would have been an adventure! To be sucked down the whirlpool in her arms. Blessed Void! What a ride for an adventurer! Kissing her scarlet lips, pressing against her soft body! What an adventure!"

He broke off, shuddering in the drizzle. Zan Fadron watched his frustration with detached eyes. Suddenly the Horgadilian broke out in a sort of rage. "Motherless Void! You Lapis-Lazulians feel nothing! You are stones! I loved the girl! She liked me just enough to be fire, flame! May the fiends... ."

He shook his oar at the dripping skies, flung it into the bolsa, seized the prow and heaved at the clumsy vessel. It grated a few inches on the sand. The muleteer heaved again, damning himself, the world, and the girl; as he damned, he worked the bolsa into the river. As it floated, he left off his cursing with his pushing and swung up on its gunwale. As he floated past Zan Fadron he reached down a hand.

"Come on, comrade," he said in the dull backwash of his violence. "Let us ride like adventurers in the maelstrom, not drown like pigs in a pool." He pulled the caravanist aboard, panting between heaves, "It is true; I meant to murder you on your bridal couch, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, but not as an enemy, not so, my friend, but as one dear friend, who murders for the woman he loves."

Zan Fadron got himself into the stern of the bolsa. The smallness, the triviality of the Horgadilian's lust, this final melodramatic gesture, this assertion of his en-

tity; how pygmyish it stood against the impersonal drizzle of the storm-tossed waves, the rising wail of the maelstrom and the vast blankness of death.

The Horgadilian pulled down the cover of his bolsa which he had designed to protect him and Tilita for a little space. It shut out the heavy misting, the savage winds, and the gray night. Then Zan Fadron heard him crawling along the sides adjusting some sort of fastenings. The agent shifted his seat on the reed bottom until he had gained some sort of repose. The little nerves of his body demanded their due attention on the eve of extinction. They were like tiny termites in the wall of a house, functioning, unconscious and unalarmed while a tornado rushed upon their dwelling.

Presently the Horgadilian said quietly: "I watched you when you left her in the paddlewood, Zan Fadron. I went in at once and waked her and yet, I let her be; there was something so terrible in her eyes. I could not do it. You can well imagine my amazement, Zan Fadron, when I found that I, Gentlehomo Solgat Sol, a muleteer and an adventurer, was really so weak as to hold off my hands to let her go. Do you think, Gentlevir, that the God or Gods that look down upon us and read the good and evil of our hearts, do you think that at the pearly gates They will say to me. 'My son, Porforio, for this great renunciation you shall have the highest seat in... .'"

The bolsa touched a stone and jarred heavily. The coughing and sucking of the whirlpool overcame the muleteer's voice. The increasing clamor of the water brought back with a last despair Zan Fadron's days with Tilita at the bird limes. Against the intense darkness, the girl arose before him with the intensity of tropical planetary sunlight, her sweetness, her eagerness, her rich earnest wish for love and children; the odor of milk suddenly filled the bolsa.

The roaring of the water drowned every thought but the image. The bolsa swung up on the piled water and swung round and round with narrowing and increasing spin. Came a vast sucking in Zan Fadron's ears. The front of the bolsa tipped up crazily. Zan Fadron, in the stern, felt himself being drawn down backward. Water came squirting down on him through a hundred interstices of the top. It covered the spinning figure of the man with a swishing sound.

The caravanist suddenly began struggling for air. He strove to pull himself up. His chest made spasmodic efforts to inhale the water roaring about his head. The form of Tilita flamed brighter, then flickered out. A deep gratitude filled the brain of the drowning man. He knew beyond the maelstrom lay nothing. In the distance he could see a bright light. The light was at the end of a dark tunnel. He was rapidly moving down the tunnel toward the light. The light was getting larger and larger. There was something in the middle of the light. It was a woman. She had blond hair. He couldn't quite make out the features of her face; perhaps he might when he moved closer. He loved her deeply, and he only loved her.

There was a large clock to the right of her, and a large clock to the left of her.

The two clocks were hovering in the air beside her. From the clock on her right to the clock on her left the clocks' hands were moving respectively — clockwise, counterclockwise.

CHAPTER 20

Zan Fadron awoke coughing up water, gagging, and choking. He fought for air. The pulmonary oxygen generators in his alveoli had responded to save him from drowning by constructing oxygen molecules from subatomic matrix and pumping out these life-giving molecules in abnormally large numbers. His coughing subsided. He began deeply breathing. Slowly he came back to his full senses. He was lying on his side on hard rock in pitch darkness. The sound of the storm was gone. He turned on his high-beams to see Solgat Sol kneeling beside him.

"Are you okay, Gentlevir?" asked Solgat Sol with deep concern in his voice, "I pulled you to the bank and gave you mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Are you all right, Gentlevir?"

"I think I'll be fine, thank you," weakly answered Zan Fadron between deep breaths. "Where are we?"

"We're in a huge underground chamber beneath Botomatl. The whirlpool dumps into this underground lake. Giant zenoc pumps at the far end of the cavern pump the water back up to the surface. This is the second time I've been here, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron."

"The second time," gasped Zan Fadron shocked.

"Yes, Gentlevir, the first time I forced a priest to come with me."

"You forced a priest to come with you?" uttered Zan Fadron in near disbelief.

"Calm down and listen, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron, and I'll tell you the whole story. Immediately preceeding the revolt, I captured a priest; our friend who is now, this very second, sitting on the rock behind you," said Solgat Sol, pointing to the other side of Zan Fadron.

The caravaneer turned to see the priest Caxas, whom he knew, staring him in the face. Caxas nodded a silent hello. Zan Fadron returned the nod, quite surprised, and still somewhat in a daze.

"I interrogated him," continued Solgat Sol, "with my needler pointed at his head. I ordered him to tell me all the secrets of the priesthood that he knew. I promised to let him go unharmed if he complied. He said that the night before a novitiate is ordained that the priest-to-be is surreptitiously made to come in contact with a certain Forerunner artifact. Upon its touch, the victim instantly goes into a zombie-like state of unconsciousness. The victim can listen to orders and be programmed. When contact with the device is broken, the victim awakes without knowing that he was ever unconscious, and without being aware of the compul-

sion which is now in his mind. This subconscious compulsion orders the novitiate to wake up in the middle of the night and jump into the whirlpool. It is a test to make certain that the ool is fully susceptible to the powers of the Forerunner relic. If fully susceptible, the priest would be trusted by the high priest to run errands outside Botomatl. A priest here in this underground chamber awaits to help the priest-to-be out of the water and guide him through the tunnel back to the surface. I made Caxas take me and show me the tunnel they use to go from here to the surface of the Botomatlian crater above us. Then I tied one of Caxas' wrists to one of my wrists and we entered the whirlpool together. We fell into this underground lake without mishap, Gentlevir Zan Fadron. We swam to the bank at almost this very spot.'' He pointed down at the rock underneath them.

''Then we climbed through the tunnel back to the surface. They told me you were to be ordained tomorrow. I thought you certainly dead, but Caxas found me and told me otherwise. Caxas works for me now, in exchange for my promise to help him escape to Lapis Lazuli.''

The caravaneer turned again to view Caxas' face for confirmation. Caxas nodded a very serious affirmative.

''Caxas told me that, as usual, he had been ordered to enter this cavern and await your splashing into this pool. I figured that I should wait the night at the bolsa to see if you would be headed for the whirlpool in the middle of the night. Was I right to wait, Gentlesap Zan Fadron?''

Zan Fadron was too dazed to answer. His suicide wish had been only something akin to a post-hypnotic suggestion. He digested this story slowly indeed.

''They use this Forerunner relic,'' continued Solgat Sol, ''to give complicated orders to priests who travel to Lapis Lazuli and elsewhere to do the bidding of the zenoc warlord Pachacamac. Caxas claims Pachacamac does not know anything about the Forerunner relic. Apparently it is a closely guarded secret that the priesthood has never revealed to the zenoc warlord. Caxas is in charge of tending this Forerunner relic. He kept it in a place, outside the temple that only he knew. Caxas brought me my needler back,'' he said flashing the needler before the promoter's eyes.

''Caxas and I made a plan together. Shortly after nightfall, when the priests had all retired, we sneaked in and carried out Thovas Tho, keeping him in stasis. We laid him on the beach and went back for Tilita, keeping her also in stasis. Then Caxas guided the two bodies through the whirlpool. They're here with us now, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron.''

''Where?'' asked Zan Fadron in utter dismay.

''Do you remember my three grimposauri?'' queried Solgat Sol.

''Y-Yes.''

''Caxas led me to them. They were alive. They were only paralyzed by

Pachacamac and the winged vampires. Near here there is a canyon. A herd of xirquanodons and a herd of grimposauri are kept there. Two tunnels lead from this chamber to that canyon, Gentlesap Zan Fadron, one large tunnel and one small one. Caxas says that the small one is seldom traveled by the winged vampires. We will take the small tunnel to the canyon. My three grimposauri are there in the canyon, packed and ready for us. Thovas Tho and Tilita are still in stasis and packed in bundles on the grimposauri.'' He paused for a moment.

''Well, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, perhaps I should tell you now. There is a third body in stasis, also packed on my grimposauri. Let me explain. Caxas showed me some of the hundreds of smaller caverns that branch from this large one. In them were thousands of slaves in stasis. Only a few of the slaves were Botomatlian. Almost all of the slaves were ools kidnaped from starships in deep space.'' He paused again and drew in a deep breath.

''Among them I found someone who, somehow or other, relates to you, Gentlevir Zan Fadron. Thovas Tho told me of your recurring dream of a girl whom you love with blond hair. I found her, Gentlehomo. I found her. She's still in stasis. I've not thawed her out. She, too, is packed on my grimposauri, in a bundle, ready to travel.''

''How do you know it's the blond of my dreams? There are millions of blond women.''

''Because, Gentlehomo Zan Fadron, she is wearing clothes, and her clothes have a name tag, the type that a waitress, bar girl or whatever might wear. The name on the name tag is 'Clockwise Counterclockwise.'''

Zan Fadron was stunned. He placed his forehead onto his forearm for a moment's rest. He was still lying down. He felt his body sag onto the igneous rock shelf beneath him. He mentally fought off a faintness caused by sensory overload. His mind was just receiving too much too fast. He felt so mixed up inside that he didn't know what to say. He coughed and blinked several times. Out of his mouth came not a single intelligible word, but a garbled mumbling that was only a groan.

''Oh, indeed,'' interrupted Caxas. ''It was you who found her?''

''I beg your pardon,'' responded Solgat Sol in an embarrassed tone. ''I stand corrected. Caxas found her. However it was I who told him about the dream, the blond woman, the two clocks, one with hands moving backwards. That prompted Caxas to remember the name on the name tag he had seen. He led me to her. Gentlehomo Caxas, I did not realize you were such a fame hog, an ool of my mettle.''

''I am not a fame hog,'' replied Caxas, ''only an accuracy hog.''

Zan Fadron saw something in his peripheral vision and turned his head to see the lights of two eyes in the distance. ''Someone's headed this way,'' he said.

''Don't worry,'' uttered Caxas, ''it's only a robot. This cavern is crawling with robots. They do all the work here. We priests are the overseers. The winged men

are our overseers. The robots don't have general sapience, only task-oriented sapience. They will not bother us."

"Our plan," continued Solgat Sol, "is for the three of us, right now, to hurry through the tunnel. All three grimposauri are on top of a xirquanodon and well tethered. You and I will ride in the gondola. Caxas will ride outside, up front in the command saddle. He will be in command of the xirquanodon. He knows the way. He's been there before, but only under relic-compulsion. This will be his first noncompulsed trip outside Botomatl. Caxas has the Forerunner relic with him. We're taking it with us. He used it to overpower the guard in the tunnel and the shepherds in the canyon. They're tied up and gagged. They were not harmed. They'll be found soon and untied. No harm will come to them. We're going to make a mad dash for Lapis Lazuli via Azak Nak."

Solgat Sol held his needler up in the air before the eyes of Zan Fadron and said. "We will tolerate no delay. Now, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, are you coming with us or are you staying?"

"I'm coming with you!" exclaimed Zan Fadron with a voice filled to the brim with very firm conviction. He felt the touch of Caxas' hand on his shoulder.

"We must be on our way," urged Caxas. "We'll help you up." He grabbed one of Zan Fadron's arms while Solgat Sol grabbed the other. Zan Fadron staggered to his feet.

"Can you walk on your own?" enquired Solgat Sol, greatly concerned.

"Y-Yes," answered Zan Fadron as they released him to stand by his strength alone.

"Follow me," ordered Caxas, as he headed toward the cavern's wall.

Zan Fadron followed close behind Caxas. Solgat Sol took up the rear. Presently the mouth of a tunnel appeared in the cavern's wall before them. It was not lighted. All three of the ools shined their highbeams into it, and then entered. They walked for about thirty Zaspian minutes through the tunnel when Caxas said: "Turn off your high-beams," as he himself did so. The other two complied immediately. "Take my hand. Give your hand to Solgat Sol." Hand in hand the three ools exited the cave into the fierce winds in the canyon. They looked up to see no familiar Stars or Constellations, for the atmospheric storm still raged, throwing up enormous clouds of dust and dirt, occluding the starlight. The strong but not unpleasant smell of xirquanodon wafted to Zan Fadron's nostrils.

"Here's the rope ladder; climb aboard," ordered Caxas, placing the rope ladder into Zan Fadron's hand. Zan Fadron clambered aboard, followed by Solgat Sol, and then Caxas himself. Upon reaching the top, Caxas switched on his high beams, and said, "Follow me," as he went from rung to rung toward the gondola car. He stopped at the gondola's entrance and ushered the other two ools inside. He entered after them, closing a thick flap made of hide behind him. "You may

turn on your high-beams now,'' permitted Caxas. The other two ools complied, examining the well stocked interior of the small but cozy gondola.

''You'll find food, water, and sleeping furs here,'' invited Caxas. ''Make yourself at home. As soon as I reach the saddle, we'll depart. This xirquanodon was scheduled to depart tonight so this is a routine departure; no cause for worry. The flying vampires will see us but they will not stop or trouble us. They never stop or examine routine departures.

''In addition to what Gentlevir Solgat Sol told you, Gentlevir Zan Fadron, we are also loaded with a full complement of slaves in stasis. They were loaded by the robots before I overpowered the guards. I didn't dare unload them; there just wasn't time. You'll find the two Gentlefems with Gentlevir Thovas Tho in bundles at the very back of the gondola.'' He pointed to the far end of the inside of the gondola car.

''Now, turn off your high-beams until I get outside and the entrance flap is down.'' They complied. Caxas departed. In a few minutes Zan Fadron could feel the xirquanodon moving.

''Everything will be routine,'' advised Solgat Sol, ''until we reach Azak Nak. We're supposed to off-load this slave complement at a warehouse there, but we shall not do so. Instead, we'll immediately get on the caravan route and head at full speed for Lapis Lazuli. Pray that we reach it. Here's my prayer.''

He held up his needler.

Zan Fadron nodded, and moved to the very back of the gondola and began looking inside the bundles. First he found Thovas Tho. His black scroll of hair was perfectly in order. ''Shall we thaw out Thovas Tho?'' he asked.

''Merciless Void, no!'' exclaimed Solgat Sol, ''that would deny me the chance to tell him upon arrival in Lapis Lazuli that it must have been the will of the Forerunner Gods that we did not awaken him before arrival in the spaceport. Gentlesap Zan Fadron, are you not tired of hearing his Forrunnerian diatribe?''

''You have a very valid point,'' agreed Zan Fadron, looking into the second bundle. He saw the sweet face of darling Tilita. So, if everything went as planned, she would indeed see her dream-city of Lapis Lazuli, the legendary place of origin of her ancestors.

Shaking with nervousness, he opened the third bundle. He drew in a deep sharp breath as he caught the first glimpse of the blond hair of his dreams. She was turned away from him so he could not see her face. He turned the body over, so her face could be viewed. He nearly swooned! His face flushed. His heart pounded in his chest. His pulse raced. Tears formed in his eyes and ran down his face. It certainly could not be a dream, because for the first time, he could clearly make out the features of her face. She was very beautiful. He could not recall ever seeing that enchanting visage before, yet his intuition screamed that he had seen

it, somehow, somewhere.

"Don't thaw her out," cautioned Solgat Sol who had crept up close behind him. "Wait till we get inside Lapis Lazuli and off this xirquanodon. To do otherwise is just asking for trouble."

Zan Fadron nodded assent, recovered his gorgeous dream girl carefully in her bundle, and tied it shut. He could clearly see the wisdom of Solgat Sol's advice. They left the bundles and went back forward together. They dug out comfortable sleeping furs to sit on. They opened some containers of food and drink. As they sat eating the delicious food items, and sipping the refreshing beverages, they could tell that the xirquanodon had just exited the canyon.

This was readily apparent to the two ools for two reasons: Firstly the xirquanodon was now level whereas it had been angled upward slightly during the long arduous climb out of the deep canyon. Secondly they felt a sudden enormous increase in vibration and rapid acceleration as the one thousand legs of the zenoc beast strove to push the beast's body forward sufficiently to reach it's cruising speed of one hundred miles an hour on this established trail between the canyon and yet another established trail which, in turn, led to the way station, Azak Nak. In the minds of the two ools were the caravanserais, wakantey girls, the market, and numerous other attractions that they would miss on this occasion when they reached and quickly passed through the caravan stop known as Azak Nak.

CHAPTER 21

"Admiral. Sir."

"What is it, Captain?"

"We've just received new orders and a long message from the Office of Naval Intelligence. It seems that a tourist from Quels went to visit a distant planet. There this tourist accidentally found a close relative working as an enslaved street cleaner. The tourist managed to get fingerprints which match perfectly to the missing relative. An agent of the Office of Naval Intelligence went there and purchased the slave at an enormously jacked-up price. Retinal and DNA scans reveal that it was indeed the missing relative. This missing person was a passenger on the QCS Zanzibar which, if you recall, we suspected was seized by a Tarantuloid Predatory Ship; either one the same type or the exact same one we destroyed in the space lane not far from the darkoid, Xorbeenus."

"Negative, Captain," interrupted the Admiral, "you're confused. The Zanzibar could not have been taken by the one we destroyed because the Zanzibar vanished after we destroyed that particular Tarantuloid Predator Ship. So, the Zanzibar must have been seized by a second one."

"Forgive me," begged the Captain, "you are absolutely correct. Anyway, Sir, ONI agents paid out a lot of high-priced bribes to a lot of front companies and

succeeded in tracking the slave back to the darkoid, Yoovellus, where perhaps the slave was first sold. "We're under orders, as of now, to proceed to Yoovellus without delay to investigate."

"Do the orders authorize me to take my entire task force?" questioned the Admiral.

"Yes, Sir, they most definitely do."

"Helm, set a course for the darkoid, Yoovellus at four-fifths speed; and engage."

"Aye aye, Sir," responded the officer at the helm with a snap.

The Admiral pressed a button on the console that was next to his arm rest. A hologram of a microphone materialized in front of his mouth. He was about to speak on a secure data link to the nine commanding officers of the nine ships in his task force, including the one that he was just speaking with in person. He opened his lips and spoke: "Whiskey, this is Alpha Bravo, you are to set a course for the darkoid, Yoovellus. Proceed there at four-fifths speed without delay. You are to depart immediately, over."

The flag bridge became very quiet except for the static of white noise heard over the secure net. One by one all nine Officers of the Deck acknowledged receipt of the orders, including the Officer of the Deck who worked for the Captain at the Admiral's elbow.

"Captain, I'll review the message in my Ready Room. Load it into the holo projector. Yeoman, bring me all the Instantcourses you have on the darkoid, Yoovellus, and the QCS Zanzibar billets, ASAP. I'll be in my ready room."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded the yeoman with courtesy.

The admiral arose from his command chair and followed the captain into the Flag Ready Room.

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"Gentlevir Hoolk Venqueb?" politely spoke the cyborg.

"Yes," grumbled the male Nanotyranus, irritated at being bothered by one of his subservient cyborgs when he was very busy.

"On my subspace view screen," related the cyborg. "I've got an admiral of the Quelsian Navy who claims that he and the nine warships he commands are in orbit around Yoovellus. The Admiral says he wants to speak to the Commander In Chief or whoever is in charge down here."

"Tell him the Commander In Chief is due back in his office in thirty minutes and that he will hail the good admiral at that time. Then shut off the screen. Be quick about it!" yelled the Nanotyranus. Hoolk Venqueb then switched on his personal communicator and hailed his assistant, the female Blektofiran Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil.

"Yes, Gentlevir," she answered promptly.

"This is an emergency," stated Hoolk Venqueb, "please answer my questions as quickly and briefly as possible. Has Caxas arrived?"

"Yes, your cyborgs took him into custody as soon as his xirquanodon pulled into Lapis Lazuli."

"Wonderful! Where is he now?"

"In compliance with your orders, he's in stasis in the forward gondola of the lead xirquanodon in your caravan at Quay Thirteen of the Lapis Lazuli Caravan Terminal."

"Outstanding! And the three doppelgangers?"

"As you ordered; I terminated all three simulations. I removed Vosos Vos, Finema Dova, and Zah Kah'than from the Forerunner doppelganger chambers. I deactivated their Chameleon suits. All three ools are presently in stasis in the same gondola as Caxas. The three are still wearing their deactivated Chameleon suits."

"Good work, Doctor. Have you installed your portable brainwashing lab in the gondola?"

"Yes, Gentlevir, it is in the second gondola on the same xirquanodon that said four ools are on."

"Perfect!" praised Hoolk Venqueb. "Have the bodies arrived from Zasp?"

"Yes, Gentlehomo, as you know, the original Solgat Sol is dead, so his body will not be arriving. Your agents on Zasp were able to repurchase at a very steep price the two slaves who are the originals of Thovas Tho and Zan Fadron."

"Fabulous! Meet me in fifteen minutes at Quay Thirteen, and be sure to bring with you those Instantcourses I ordered you to prepare."

"I'll be at Quay Thirteen in fifteen minutes with the courses," replied Doctor Hogveb Zunil, obediently.

Fifteen minutes later, Hoolk Venqueb, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, and four subservient cyborgs met at Quay Thirteen of the Lapis Lazuli Caravan Terminus.

"Follow me quickly!" ordered Hoolk Venqueb to the other ools as he marched off toward the lead xirquanodon of a five-xirquanodon caravan. A cyborg could be seen sitting in it's command saddle. Hoolk Venqueb grabbed the rope ladder and quickly climbed aboard. In quick pursuit, followed Doctor Hogveb Zunil and the four cyborgs.

"Get into the gondola," ordered Hoolk Venqueb to the others who quickly complied. To the cyborg sitting in the command saddle, he yelled: "Forward Ho! Maximum speed!"

Immediately the xirquanodon lunged forward. Behind it followed four more of the thousand-legged zenoc beasts, completing the caravan. Then he himself

entered the gondola. He sat down beside Doctor Hogveb Zunil. He positioned a portable subspace view screen on the carapace in front of him. He out-telescoped the antenna. At the tip of the antenna was a concave broadcasting and receiving dish. He positioned it towards his office in Lapis Lazuli.

"This will broadcast a tight-beam to the transceiver in my office. The office transceiver will rebroadcast it by wide beam to an admiral of the Quelsian Navy who is in orbit with his warships."

"I understand," said the female Blektofiran Octopus with dead seriousness and sharp competence.

"Hopefully the good admiral will think that I'm in Lapis Lazuli. This quick ruse just might provide us a measure of protection, depending upon what the good admiral has in mind for us."

The female Octopus nodded in the affirmative.

Hoolk Venqueb looked at his chronometer and waited until the promised thirty minutes had passed, at which time the xirquanodon was a good distance away from the spaceport. Then he hailed the Quelsian admiral. An Image of the admiral instantly popped up on the screen.

"My name is Hoolk Venqueb. I am the mayor and chief constable of the spaceport of Lapis Lazuli. I am also Commander In Chief of the Yoovellusian Defense Forces. How may I be of service?"

"I am Vice Admiral Fos Devas, of the Quelsian Navy. I am here in orbit around Yoovellus, along with the nine warships that make up the task force that I command. Let me start at the beginning.

"A certain citizen of Quels was in deep space on board the Quelsian Civilian Ship Zanzibar when it disappeared. We suspect it was seized by a Tarantuloid Predatory Ship using a technology in advance of our own. We found this same citizen later enslaved. We suspect that this slave was first sold here on Yoovellus. We are here to investigate."

"Well, Admiral," began Hoolk Venqueb, "slavery is legal here on Yoovellus as it is on numerous worlds. You have no jurisdiction here. You say that the Zanzibar disappeared in deep space. Well, if it was in deep space, then you have no jurisdiction over that area of deep space. In order to investigate the matter here on Yoovellus, you would have to have a valid warrant or license, either issued by me. You would need to meet alone with me in my office to request either one. So, as Commander In Chief, I am requesting that you transport your task force one light year away from Yoovellus. Then you return in a shuttle with no more that a couple of your ools. Then, as I said, we shall meet in my office to discuss the matter. Do you understand?"

"Do you understand?" belligerently voiced the admiral. "I clearly see that you don't have a single warship at your command. Your request doesn't seem to

carry much muscle to back it up.''

''This is a Forerunner darkoid. We have Forerunner defenses in place, up and running. These Forerunner defenses are far in advance of your technology. So, would you be so kind as to comply with my polite request?''

''Gentlesap Hoolk Venqueb,'' uttered the admiral in a very arrogant tone, ''how would you like it if I land one of my ships at your spaceport and take command of your entire city?''

''Admiral,'' answered Hoolk Venqueb coolly, ''as Commander In Chief, I am now politely changing my request to a direct order. You are hereby commanded to remove your task force one light year away from the darkoid, Yoovellus. Do you understand this order? I don't want to have to hold you in contempt for disobedience of a Commander In Chief's direct order. Furthermore, something urgent has come up here that demands my immediate attention. I must, therefore, go off screen for two Zaspian hours. I will hail you again in two hours. Hopefully by then you will have complied with my order. Hoolk Venqueb, out.''

Then he shut the subspace view screen completely off.

''Get your stun pistols ready to use,'' he ordered the cyborgs. They nodded and complied. ''Take Caxas and the three ools out of stasis,'' he ordered the female Octopus. She quickly completed the task, so that Caxas, Finema Dova, Vosos Vos and the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than soon sat on the carapace with their backs leaning on the wall of the gondola car. All four ools looked exhausted and somewhat dazed.

''Did you give them back their original memories that you had drained from them?''

''Yes, Gentlesap,'' answered the female Blektofiran Octopus courteously.

''Give them the Instantcourses,'' ordered Hoolk Venqueb to Doctor Hogveb Zunil, who promptly handed each of the four ools a tiny cylinder.

''This is an Instantcourse I've had prepared for all four of you. For all of you except Caxas. It is a thorough briefing of everything that has transpired. It explains the Forerunner doppelganger machine, the Chameleon suit, and it contains all the memories that your three Chameleon suits' avatars' doppelgangers acquired while you were zombified. For all of you, including Caxas, it contains my plan to assault and seize the zenoc warlord of Botomatl and it describes the role you are to have in that assault if you choose to assist me. It contains my plans for the future of Pachacamac, the winged men, and Botomatl itself, after and if the assault is successful. Please insert the Instantcourses into your dataports now.''

Each one but Caxas inserted the cylinder into the hole at the base of their skull. Doctor Hogveb Zunil had to help Caxas who did not know, and was quite shocked to find out that, while he was unconscious, a dataport had been installed in the base of his skull. He finally managed it, however, eyes sparkling wildly as

the data stream flooded into his brain. After a few minutes all four had completed the download and removed the cylinders.

"So, let's get right to the point. Do you wish to help me assault Botomatl or not?"

"Where is my beloved?" asked Zah Kah'than.

"And where is my fiancé?" echoed Finema Dova.

"Where is Clockwise Counterclockwise and Tilita?" queried Vosos Vos.

"All four are in stasis and are presently in my office in Lapis Lazuli. If you consent to help me, I promise that I'll sell them to you at the standard slave price."

Zah Kah'than glanced quickly at his fellow ools and said via his hovering, interpreting holohead: "We promise to forgive you for what you've done to us without our permission, and to help you assault Botomatl, and attempt to capture Pachacamac, if you will give us the four ools free of charge, and grant Caxas and Tilita asylum in Lapis Lazuli."

"It is a deal if the rest of you agree."

In unison they, together with Caxas, agreed, and in doing so, also agreed to their proposed roles in the assault on Botomatl.

"Pass the case around," Hoolk Venqueb ordered of the cyborg nearest him. The cyborg immediately pulled out a squarp-skin case, opened it, took out one of the many cigars in it, and passed the case around to everyone. Each ool took out a cigar, even the Octopus, in the old Yoovellusian bargaining tradition.

"Well, let's all have a look at them. Bring out the original Thovas Tho and the original Zan Fadron."

Presently the two ools awoke from stasis and stared in confusion around them.

"Has Doctor Hogveb Zunil restored your original memory downloads to you and removed your enslavement programming as I ordered her to do?"

The two ools both nodded in the affirmative.

"Very well, give them the Instantcourses." Doctor Hogveb Zunil handed each of them a small cylinder.

"I've had this Instantcourse prepared for you. It contains all the memories that were acquired by three Chameleon suits' avatars' doppelgangers, two of which were formed from your downloaded memories and personas. The third was from an ool who has passed away. In it also, are the details of my plan to assault the volcanic crater of Botomatl and attempt to seize its zenoc warlord, as well as my proposed role for you in the assault if you choose to help me. Please insert the Instantcourses, now."

Both ools complied. Three minutes later, they both removed the cylinders and gave them back to the female Octopus.

Hoolk Venqueb saw that they were done, and asked: "Well what have you

decided?''

''I will do it for my freedom,'' said the real Zan Fadron.

''I will also do it for my freedom,'' stated the real Thovas Tho.

''It is a deal!'' exclaimed the male Nanotyranus from the planet Zasp. ''Pass them the case.'' Each of the two removed and kept a cigar from the squarp-skin case.

Hoolk Venqueb then turned to Caxas and enquired: ''Caxas, did you and Doctor Hogveb Zunil use your Forerunner relic to un-coerce the religious conversion of Thovas Tho as I had asked?''

''Yes, Gentlevir, we did it, and it was successful. He is no longer a convert of Forerunnerianism unless he's converted again on his own since then.''

''What religion do you now believe in, Gentlesap Thovas Tho?'' interrogated Hoolk Venqueb.

''I do not have a religion at the present moment,'' responded Thovas Tho.

''Do you think you might again become a Forrunnerian?'' asked the Blektofiran female Octopus.

''I think not, but I'm undecided. I do resent the fact that I was mentally coerced into conversion by my contact with a Forerunner relic. Thank you for bringing that to my attention and reversing the effect at long last. I feel like a very heavy burden has been lifted from my shoulders.''

''You are very welcome,'' sympathized Doctor Hogveb Zunil, glancing toward Hoolk Venqueb who echoed:

''Indeed you are very welcome. We're glad we could help in that regard, aren't we Caxas?''

''Y-Yes, certainly,'' responded Caxas, nodding forcefully.

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The atmospheric storm was still at full strength over Botomatl. A Lapis-Lazulian meteorologist had predicted it would last another week at least. Ordinarily that would be a dreaded event, but to the commandoes it was a godsend. Vosos Vos had a large suction-cup device attached to each hand and to each foot. Each suction-cup had microtractor beams in it. He placed his right-hand suction cup against the stone and triggered it. To test it, he put some of his weight on it. It held superbly. Then, one by one, he attached each of the three other suction cups to the stones. By alternately triggering and releasing the devices, he was able to traverse across the vertical face of the stones much like a fly on a wall.

He tried his best to make as little noise as possible. The fierce winds of the storm tore at his grip on the stones. The howling winds smothered what little noise he was making. Finally he reached his destination on a section of the landward stones just above Pachacamac's clandestine exit onto the Web of the Stars. Vosos

Vos pulled from his backpack the device he had been carrying there. He carefully unrolled it. With great attention to detail, he reached down below him and placed the long device horizontally above the secret door. He triggered the device. Many microtractor beams reached out from it to grip and hold the stone, firmly anchoring the device to the stone. He released it. The device, when activated by remote control would instantly project downward an invisible but impenetrable force field. The remote control was in the six-fingered truehands of the Zaspian Nanotyranus, Hoolk Venqueb, who was hidden just inside the nearby Hopeless jungle.

As quietly as possible, Vosos Vos retraced his path. One by one, he deactivated the suction cups and got off the vertical face of the stone and back onto the horizontal. Not one rope of the Web of the Stars had been touched. He packed the suction cups into his backpack and headed towards the place in the Hopeless jungle that hid the Nanotyranus. After a brisk trot, he reached Hoolk Venqueb and deposited his backpack onto the ground. He covered his skin with red pigment and changed into the clothes of a Botomatlian.

At long last, all of Hoolk Venqueb's preparations were done; his numerous orders complied with. Finema Dova's blond hair had been dyed jet black; every inch of her skin massaged with red pigment. She was the only female in the group of five. Caxas and Vosos Vos were on her left side. The original Thovas Tho and the original Zan Fadron were on her right side. She led a vicuna lamb by a short leash. All were dressed in Botomatlian garb. After a short walk, they reached the Web of the Stars. All but Finema Dova kneeled with their backs to the Web, face down, and eyes covered with hands.

Finema Dova took the leash off the vicuna lamb. The lamb made a pitiful noise and licked her hand. She wadded up the leash and quickly placed it into a pocket. Feeling sorry for the poor lamb, she nevertheless reached down and picked it up into her arms. With a mighty shove she threw it into the center of the Web of the Stars. Then she, too, quickly turned away and knelt with head down and eyes covered. The lamb bleated loudly for mercy. A moment passed. Suddenly the tiny receiver that they had placed into their ears sounded with the voice of Hoolk Venqueb: "Now!"

Out of their waistbands they pulled their stun pistols and whirled around. The monster had already released the vicuna from its entanglement and was headed in a flash with the lamb toward the trap door. All five ools fired at the monster, time after time. Each had a pistol that was equipped with a silencer so only small muffled noises were heard. The giant spider hit the invisible and impenetrable force field that completely prevented it from escaping via the same route it had exited. About the same split microsecond that it fumbled at the force field, five hundred bees fell onto the tarantuloid from above. These bees were enslaved

and programmed by Hoolk Venqueb to sting the spider with paralyzing venom.

A split second later, eight enslaved, programmed eagleoid descended on the spider, each birdoid struggling to grab in its claws the graspers at the end of a designated leg. In a mad frenzy the savage beast flung bees and eagleoid in all directions.

The giant spider crouched as if to spring off the Web into the lake, when out of the water shot the head and body of the serpent, Zah Kah'than, spitting venom directly into the front two of the spider's eight eyes. Before the Ophidian had time to fall back into the water, out of depths of the lake came a pulsating, speeding body; the female Blektofiran Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, whose torpedo-shaped form sailed gracefully high into the air just above the Tarantuloid. Instantly two of her tentacles parted, and in one massive gush, she discharge six gallons of viscid, sticky, gooey black ink into the other six eyes and over the entire cephalothorax of the evil Tarantuloid. Then her body continued to glide over the limey ropings and she splashed safely back into the lake on the other side of the Web of the Stars.

Out of the water, from four sides of the Web of the Stars, came four cyborg commandoes with water-breathing apparati. Each cyborg had a pistol that projected a tractor beam. These tractor beams kept the monster from leaving the Web of the Stars. The tractor beams successfully pinned the baby-eating monster down until the stun pellets and paralyzing bee venom had a few moments to take effect. Thoroughly greased, Finema Dova, Vosos Vos, Zan Fadron, and Thovas Tho, climbed quickly onto the Web of the Stars to grab the spider's legs. They struggled hard to keep out of the reach of the spider's fangs which were dripping hemotoxins and neurotoxins in wet foamy discharges.

Well greased up, the priest, Caxas, climbed onto the Web next with a shaft of bamboo, which he promptly jammed into the monster's maw. C-R-U-N-C-H — the monster bit off the end of the bamboo staff and spit the piece out. Caxas poked it in again, again, and again. An oiled Zah Kah'than slithered into and out of the webbing and latched onto one of the spider's ankles firmly with his mouth. Little by little, they disentangled the monster from the silk ropes, and pulled the Tarantuloid completely off the Web of Stars. By this time, the tranquillizing, paralyzing, and stunning agents had done their dirty work.

The giant spider's legs were only twitching and moving very weakly, in slow motion. The Nanotyranus Hoolk Venqueb and four cyborg commandos suddenly arrived on the scene, running at full speed, carrying a large bag-like thing made by hollowing out the body of a dead grimposaurus.

"Get it into the bag! Hurry!" urged the Nanotyranus in a loud whisper that could barely be heard over the whistling winds of the fierce atmospheric storm that raged throughout the Botomatl crater and for miles around.

They pushed, tugged, and bent the giant spider until the monster was completely inside the belly of the hollowed out grimpo, and then they zipped the grimpo's stomach up. Hoolk Venqueb pressed buttons on the grimposaurus' antigrav saddle and manipulated controls on the antigrav belts that had been strapped around the neck and ankles of the dead grimposaurus. The entire thing rapidly became neutrally buoyant; it would neither rise into the air nor fall on its own accord. In other words, it was now weightless. Hopefully, to any winged vampire, flying overhead, it would look like nothing more than a dead, unconscious, or sick grimposaurus being towed along.

"Grab a strap!" ordered the Zaspian Nanotyranus in a loud whisper. On one side of the hollow grimposaurus, Finema Dova and Vosos Vos each grabbed hold of a strap. On the other side, the real Zan Fadron and the real Thovas Tho each held a strap.

"Follow me!" commanded the Nanotyranus as he took off at a fast run headed for the Hopeless jungle.

Nearly at the same time the four cyborg commandos made final adjustments to their water-breathing apparati and slipped into the water beside their commander for this operation, the female Blektofiran Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil. The group of five were intently listening to the receiver they had placed into their ear canals.

They were listening to the voice of Hoolk Venqueb: "Okay, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, it's time for you and your team to start sinking downward. Finema Dova has reached the Web of the Stars. The others are kneeling. She is taking off the leash."

Completely underwater, all four cyborgs nodded to the female Blektofiran Octopus that they were ready. She dove down slowly into the depths of the lake directly beneath the Web of the Stars. Soundlessly the four cyborgs followed her down, silently paddling their jet-finned feet.

"Remember," cautioned Hoolk Venqueb over the secure data link, "not to approach the grotto so closely that someone inside could see you until I say the word 'now' forcefully. Finema Dova has pocketed the leash. She's picking up the vicuna. The lamb has landed in the middle of the Web. Now!"

Doctor Hogveb Zunil zoomed downward and was the first to reach the underwater entrance to the grotto. She could see the two winged vampires who were standing guard inside. They were lounging on the rock shelf, in the air above the water line.

One of her tentacles encircled a torpedo. She pushed some last-second buttons on it, aimed it, and let it go. It accelerated into the grotto, and made a ninety degree turn upward, shooting up into the air inside the cave. Explosively it popped open, throwing two swarms of enslaved, programmed bees into the air of the grotto.

Each swarm contained five hundred bees. One swarm was programmed to attack only living beings in the grotto itself. The other swarm was programmed to ignore anyone in the grotto itself, and quickly fly into tunnels leading away from the grotto and to search out and sting any living being they could find within their ten-minute life-span. At the end of ten Zaspian minutes every bee in both swarms would automatically die. Every bee's sting contained powerfully paralyzing venom. The bees, of course, would sting nothing that was covered with oil containing queen-bee pheromones. Naturally Hoolk Venqueb's entire assault team was liberally massaged with such oil.

The female Blektofiran Octopus and the four cyborgs she commanded, parted ways. She had not intended to enter the grotto. She and the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than had made other plans. He was in the water, but near the surface with a second group of four water-breathing cyborgs. She propelled herself forcefully upward toward the surface of the lake.

Her four cyborgs rapidly swam into the grotto, surfacing inside the cave. Each cyborg had a tractor beam pistol in his left hand and a stun pistol in his right hand. The four cyborgs opened fire on two winged women who were swatting bees like mad. The two vampires collapsed onto the rock shelf. The cyborgs scrambled quickly onto the rock shelf, and placed the two winged women in stasis. One cyborg stayed in the grotto for two purposes; firstly to guard the two winged ools, and secondly, to guard against the possibility that Pachacamac might jump off the Web of the Stars, dive down, and attempt to escape by entering the underwater grotto.

The other three cyborgs rushed into the only tunnel that led out of the grotto. Using dead reckoning they found their way to the silk-lined chamber which had the trapdoor exit onto the Web of the Stars. The bees had already done their job there, for one winged woman and two winged men lay almost completely paralyzed on the silk webbings that covered the floor. The cyborgs placed the three vampires promptly into stasis. They carried the three winged ools quickly down through the tunnel into the grotto, depositing them beside the first two vampires. They tied the five vampires together, threw them into the water, and the entire team swam out of the grotto with the captured vampires in tow. They swam upward toward the surface of the lake.

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The hollow grimposaurus hovered from eight feet above the ground to a few inches above, as its four strap-tenders ran, pulling it along toward the Hopeless jungle. Beside them, the Ophidian slithered rapidly along, having no trouble at all keeping up. Behind him was the four water-breathing cyborgs that he commanded.

Once in the jungle they paused to regroup. Caxas, the real Thovas Tho, and

the real Zan Fadron, grabbed loaded stun pistols and headed back, this time towards the Temple of the Stars. Their mission now would be to secure the temple, stunning the priests and the winged vampires, and, if possible, accomplishing it all without rendering permanent injury to anyone. It was especially important to them to keep weapons out of the hands of Gogoma and see that no harm came to the beloved high priest. The Ophidian, Zah Kah'than grabbed one fully loaded mouth-and-tongue operated stun pistol. Carrying it in his mouth, he rapidly turned and started slithering on his way back to the lake to rendezvous with the female Blektofiran Octopus who had stayed there with her cyborg commando team, and who was awaiting him. His cyborg commando team rushed after him. His and her mission, now, was to go down the whirlpool together to secure the huge underground lake and chamber. They would lead the two cyborg teams down and through the whirlpool.

"Forward Ho!" ordered Hoolk Venqueb and set off at a run though the Hopeless jungle towards the crater to wait. Everyone else there ran after him. Forty Zaspian minutes later they reached the crater wall. They all paused for a moment together. Hoolk Venqueb consulted the DF-er on his wrist, and said: "It's in this direction."

Walking was difficult. The strong storm winds hit the side of the crater and were bent downward by the overhanging rim. The strong downward winds then hit the ground and turned another ninety degrees to blow strongly horizontally away from the crater wall. So it was very difficult to be near the crater wall at ground level. All the ools bent their bodies into the wind, leaning strongly toward the crater wall.

Finema Dova and Vosos Vos were each desperately holding on to the straps of the hollow grimposaurus. Tending the straps on the other side of the hollow grimpo were two cyborgs who were also battling with the winds. It was all the four could do to keep Pachacamac from flying away in the wind. Hoolk Venqueb saw their plight and grabbed a strap, lending a hand.

Finally they reached the two cyborgs who had been waiting for them at the rendezvous point. The cyborg pair were guarding the four lines which the team had used to descend over the rim into the crater. The four lines reached upward to and over the rim. Each line was tied to at least one grimposaurus far above over the rim.

"Thank the Void these four lines are all made of Zaspian Unbreakable Line," yelled the Zaspian Nanotyranus over the wailing winds. He attached all four lines to the saddle of the hollow grimposaurus.

"Attach your harnesses to the grimposaurus' saddle," commanded Hoolk Venqueb. Everyone complied as quickly as possible. Hoolk Venqueb signalled to those above by secure data link for them to begin hauling them up. Quickly the

slack on the lines vanished as the lines became taut. Slowly they were all lifted off the ground, and then higher and higher in the air. They were all, more or less, in one crowded terribly uncomfortable bundle. The fierce winds of the atmospheric storm began pounding them into the hard volcanic rock that was the side of the crater. They were all using their feet and hands to keep themselves and to keep the hollow grimposaurus off the abrasive and deadly rock wall. A powerful gust of wind slammed them into a rock formation. Two cyborgs were knocked unconscious, and — s-n-a-p — one Zaspian Unbreakable Line snapped in two. A split Zaspian second later another Zaspian Unbreakable Line broke. Two Zaspian seconds later the third Zaspian Unbreakable Line popped asunder. Now they were down to one line.

They were almost to the rim; just a little more. S-N-A-P— the last Zaspian Unbreakable Line broke! Hoolk Venqueb had been punching buttons madly on the antigrav belt which he wore around his waist, as well as on the ones around the neck and ankles of the dead grimposaurus. This effort payed off, for the entire group was now almost weightless. Fierce winds came over the rim, dipped down, grabbed them, and tumbled them, end over end, toward the middle of the Botomatlian crater. Being almost weightless, instead of completely weightless, they were falling, albeit slowly. The fiercely powerful wind was propelling them forward at an enormous velocity.

Hoolk Venqueb realized they were doomed; that they were either going to hit the ground or the opposite crater wall at a fatal speed; a deadly velocity that would tear their flesh-and-blood bodies to shreds upon impact. He turned on his high-beams and looked down into the crater, analyzing possibilities. Under sudden inspiration, he began, once again, madly punching buttons on his antigrav belt. Then he did the same to the grimposaurus' antigrav saddle. He did not touch the controls on the antigrav belts on the grimposaurus's neck or four ankles. Those of the group left conscious, could clearly deduce his thinking. Hoolk Venqueb was increasing just enough weight so that they would land in the lake.

The lake rapidly reached up for them, and their splash was jarring in the extreme, and deafening in spite of the storm's noise. Finema Dova and Vosos Vos forcefully swam upward. With them came the huge bundle to which they were tied. Their heads broke the surface at the same moment. Simultaneously they switched on their high beams and looked around, trying to become oriented. Simultaneously they looked into the blinding glare of each other's eyes.

"We actually overshot the lake," yelled Finema Dova over the sound of waves and wind. She felt a rapid flow in the water around them.

"Yeah," yelled back Vosos Vos, "we are in the river and rather far... ." His sentence was interrupted by a huge belching, gurgling, burping sound. The noise was so loud that it overpowered the sound of the storm. Finema Dova and Vosos

Vos, once again, looked into the blinding glare of each other's high-beams, for they had simultaneously realized what the noise was. In fact, they had that memory in two places in each of their brains: in their subconscious dream center, and in their conscious memory from the downloaded Instantcourse.

The savage roar of the water intensified, drowning out all other thoughts in their minds. Vosos Vos' feet hit stone with painful force for a brief moment. The entire massive conglomeration that they were part of, tilted on a wall of water. The group began to spin. The speed of the spin accelerated forcefully. The spin became tighter and tighter.

A deafening sucking reached into the very souls of Finema Dova, Vosos Vos, Hoolk Venqueb, and all the other ools who were tied together in that ragged bundle. The roaring water engulfed their faces. Suddenly it was either hold one's breath or breath fluid. Then the bottom seemed to fall out from under them. They fell down, down, down, spinning. With a bone-breaking jar, they hit the surface of the underground lake. For the second time they made a splash that was deafening.

Once again, they swam forcefully upward toward the surface, tied to the great bundle. Fortunately the antigrav belts on the neck and ankles of the hollow grimposaurus were on full power; the hollow grimposaurus acted much like a gigantic cork. The faces of Finema Dova and Vosos Vos broke the surface, coughing and gasping. Then out popped a familiar sight in front of Finema Dova's face, the female Blektofiran Octopus, Doctor Hogveb Zunil.

"How did you get here?" gasped Finema Dova, stunned.

"Hoolk Venqueb," responded the female Blektofiran Octopus, "has been giving me a blow by blow report on a secure data link. So, I knew a little in advance that you were coming through the whirlpool."

"Have you secured the cavern?" coughed and gasped Hoolk Venqueb.

"Yes, Gentlevir," answered Doctor Hogveb Zunil. "We captured four more winged vampires here, and four Botomatlian priests. We've also secured the canyon and the two tunnels leading to the can... ."

Suddenly the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than, interrupted with his holoheadinterpreter's voice full of humor and sarcasm: "Would you rather take a tunnel, instead, Gentlesaps?"

The male Nanotyranus from the planet Zasp opened his mouth wide, exposing his great teeth. His roaring laughter echoed back and forth across the cavern. It was the first time anyone present had ever heard the Nanotyranus laugh. In fact, it was the first occasion that anyone present had ever realized that the Nanotyranus had the ability to laugh.

Out of the water popped the heads of eight water-breathing cyborg commandoes. They began pulling the giant ragged bundle toward the bank. Within min-

utes, they were all lying on the shelf of igneous rock. A quick check inside the hollow grimposaurus revealed that Pachacamac was still alive, still paralyzed, and no worse for the wear.

A few minutes later, two more ools fell from the whirlpool into the lake, quickly followed by a large bundle. Cyborgs swam out to assist the authentic Zan Fadron, the authentic Thovas Tho, and the large bundle to reach the bank.

"Where's Caxas?" asked Vosos Vos.

"He is descending in the tunnel," replied Zan Fadron, climbing onto the shelf of igneous rock. "Thovas Tho and I felt the wish for a bona fide memory of the whirlpool, instead of the fake downloaded ones. Caxas said that he had suffered enough real memories of it."

"What's in the bundle?" queried Finema Dova, curiously.

The real Thovas Tho answered, having just climbed out of the water: "Three priests in stasis: Gogoma, Jagala, and Quiz-Quiz. We took them by complete surprise. We met with no resistance. We saw no winged ools."

All eyes turned to warmly greet Caxas who had just walked up.

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Caxas, seated in the command saddle, coaxed the xirquanodon to start moving forward. Instantly one thousand legs underneath the long body strained to obey as the mighty zenoc beast lurched forward. Unfazed by the terrible atmospheric storm that howled around it, the colossal zenoc entity began to climb the inclined road carved in the side of the canyon. Twenty Zaspian minutes later it reached the top, and exited the canyon. Rapidly the xirquanodon picked up speed. The ground greatly vibrated from the impact of a thousand hooves. Caxas breathed a sigh of relief, for no Winged Ool had accosted him. Soon they were thundering down the trail, through the storm, at one hundred miles per hour. Ten Zaspian minutes later, they reached their destination, Hoolk Venqueb's caravan. Caxas guided the beast so that it would take its place as the sixth and last xirquanodon in the caravan. Caxas then ordered the zenoc beast to come to a complete halt. Immediately ools and bundles began exiting gondolas and transferring.

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Inside the gondola sat Finema Dova, Vosos Vos, the original Zan Fadron, the original Thovas Tho, Caxas, and Hoolk Venqueb. All eyes were on the entrance as Doctor Hogveb Zunil entered and stood before them.

"Well, Doctor Hogveb Zunil, what do you have to report?" asked Hoolk Venqueb impatiently.

"I've downloaded the creature's memories, personas and languages. I had to make eight downloads, since the sapient has eight brains. She is a female from a distant planet which her race originated upon and still rules. The planet is called

O'flept. She is an O'fleptian. Male O'fleptians speak one language; females another. Each understands the other's language but avoids speaking it. Thus we have two native languages in the data base. On O'flept she is addressed as: Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex. The name Pachacamac is only her Botomatlian name."

The female Blektofiran Octopus handed to each ool a small cylinder, said: "This is the Instantcourse I've prepared for each of you. It contain's Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex's memories, languages, and the eight personas of her eight brains."

"Insert them," ordered Hoolk Venqueb without hesitation. The female Blektofiran Octopus looked on as they all complied. Five Zaspian minutes later, they were all finished and had withdrawn the cylinders from their dataports in the bases of their skulls.

Suddenly into the gondola car came a cyborg commando who said to the female Octopus: "It's done, Madam. They were prepared for everything except the bees. The bees took them completely by surprise. They only had six guards in Beta Ether. All six of the Winged Ools have been apprehended. There are no unaccounted-for Winged Ools or O'fleptian in or around Botomatl, in either Alpha or Beta Ether."

"You and your commandoes have done a magnificent job, Gentleborg! Tell your ools I said this, and give them our most heartfelt thanks. Now, you may be dismissed. You and your ools may take the next twenty-four hours off," replied Doctor Hogveb Zunil. The cyborg nodded, bowed, turned, and exited the gondola.

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All six xirquanodons were at the very edge of the rim of the volcanic crater of Botomatl. On top of each xirquanodon stood ools firmly tethered. All were looking down into the crater. On the same xirquanodon, stood Finema Dova, Vosos Vos, and the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than. They were standing beside each other, looking into the crater, listening to the voice of Hoolk Venqueb which was coming to them via a receiver in their ear canal. They, as well as everyone else, were wearing spacesuits.

"Remember," cautioned the voice of Hoolk Venqueb over the secure data link, "we are only going to stay in Beta Ether for sixty seconds. Program the alarm on your chronometer to ring sixty seconds after you press the button. Do not press the button until after you press your Ether-morpher. Turn up the juice, now, on your antigrav belt so that your feet rise two feet above the carapace. Look down at your three tethers; be sure they're equidistant. Give the tethers sufficient slack. Double-check to see that each of your three tethers have the green Ether-morphing stripe I had placed on them. This is important. Your life depends on it. I repeat, stay at slightly less weight than neutral buoyancy. Don't press the Ether-morpher

until I say the word 'now' forcefully. Raise your right hand when you are ready.'' After a moment all the ools' hands had been raised.

''Now!'' yelled Hoolk Venqueb. Every one of these tethered ools manipulated a control on the front of their spacesuit. This control was the Ether-morpher. Then, as ordered, each ool quickly pressed the button on their wrist chronometer to set the sixty second alarm which would ring in the cochlea of their inner ear.

The darkoid, as they knew it, seemed to instantly vanish. Under high-beams they looked down into the place where the volcanic crater of Botomatl had been the previous second. The space was filled with starships, captured, moth-balled, pirated starships! They were looking at a Sargasso of lost ships. This was the fruit of the labors of Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex, also known as the Star God, Pachacamac.

The sixty seconds expired. The alarm in everyone's inner ear rang. As ordered, everyone pressed their Ether-morpher, and metamorphosed from Beta Ether back to Alpha Ether. Instantly the volcanic crater of Botomatl reappeared before their eyes, and all the frozen starships had vanished.

''Unbelievable!'' whispered Finema Dova into the microphone inside her helmet.

''Spectacular!'' gasped Vosos Vos in awe.

''Amazing beyond measure!'' hissed the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than, in consternation.

''The way she can spin a fast web completely around one ship with her webclimber!'' praised Finema Dova in a voice full of deep respect.

''The way that web throws the entire ship instantly into null tau!'' commented Vosos Vos in near disbelief.

''The way the web, at the same moment, metamorphoses the entire ship into Beta Ether!'' lauded Zah Kah'than in a tone of profound reverence.

''The way the web, at the same moment, makes the whole ship weightless and inertialess. That makes the ship lighter than a feather. Towing and storing the ship would be the simplest of matters, weightwise,'' uttered Finema Dova in a tone of great fascination. To her Implunt, Dolcha, she datavised: "Sweetie, what's your opinion?"

Her Implunt, Dolcha, promptly transmitted a reply: "Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex and her deeds are indeed very impressive. O'fleptian technology is obviously superior to yours in many areas. Yet, I see nothing that would rule out the possibility that other O'fleptians might attack you in revenge, and try to seize what you've taken. You may be in very grave danger. I advise departing Yoovellus immediately and taking with you, at the very least, the two Instant-courses that relate to Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex."

CHAPTER 22

Vosos Vos and his closest friend, the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than hurried down the sidewalk of Maiden Lane in Lapis Lazuli. Behind Vosos Vos, and connected to him via line, was a long bundle that floated in midair. It had two antigrav belts wrapped around it. Inside the bundle were the two gentlefems in stasis: Clockwise Counterclockwise and the Outool, Tilita. The bundle, being of neutral buoyancy was effortlessly pulled along by Vosos Vos.

"We're going to be late if we don't hurry. We're supposed to meet them in the bar in one Zaspian minute," said Zah Kah'than via the interpretation of his floating holohead. Vosos Vos immediately broke into a trot. The Ophidian increased the speed of his slithering and had no trouble keeping up.

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The bar was owned by Hoolk Venqueb Enterprises, Ltd., and was one of Lapis Lazuli's most popular night spots. It was especially favored by seasoned spacers from the starships that frequently landed at this exotic darkoid spaceport. On stage, a nude female Blektofiran Octopus danced to the beat of a pleasant spacerock song. The music was loud but not so loud that conversations were difficult. At one table sat Finema Dova, holding the hand of her fiancé who had just bent to give her another sweet kiss on the cheek. On the other side of Finema Dova sat Vosos Vos. Three seats past Vosos Vos sat the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than. Between Vosos Vos and the Ophidian were two empty chairs. Behind one chair stood Clockwise Counterclockwise, frozen in stasis. Behind the other chair stood sweet Tilita, also in stasis.

"You don't really think that we're just going to sit here and let you do this?" complained the fiancé to Vosos Vos.

"That's right," echoed Finema Dova in full agreement.

"Let's get something straight," snapped Vosos Vos, looking at the fiancé, "You are just barely a friend, and as soon as I found out that you were her fiancé, your status on my friendship scale plummeted downward to just a hair above zero. And as for you," he said, looking into the face of Finema Dova, "You are not a friend; have never been a friend; and will never be a friend. You're just an ex-boss and I'm stressing the ex." He pulled papers out of his pocket and held them up for them to see. "These are the slave papers. I own both of them under Yoovellusian law. They are my property. You both have absolutely no say in the matter."

"But, my friend, I, too, have been having doubts about whether this is a good idea," voiced Zah Kah'than via his hovering holohead.

"I concede it's a bad idea," confessed Vosos Vos, replacing the papers into his pocket, "I just couldn't think of a better one."

"What about taking Clockwise Counterclockwise back to the familiar surround-

ings of the Bar of the Everchanging Name on Argonus,'' suggested Finema Dova, who by Instantcourse had become fully informed as to the events surrounding Clockwise Counterclockwise. ''She may go into shock here.''

''Because,'' countered Vosos Vos, ''the bounty hunters might swoop back down on her. If we were with her and resisted them, they would enslave us as punishment for interfering.''

''A very valid point,'' agreed the Ophidian, Zah Kah'than. ''The bounty hunters in the spaceport of Argon have informants in those bars. Sometimes the informants are the bar owners themselves. The bounty hunters are a power and a law unto themselves. We would need an army to resist them. We don't have an army.''

''What would you suggest?'' asked the fiancé of the Ophidian.

''I'm at a loss,'' responded Zah Kah'than, ''however, I will support Vosos Vos in his decision, whatever he decides. I have great faith in his judgement.''

The Ophidian turned his head to glance into the lovely eyes of his beloved, the female Ophidian that he had rescued after twenty-five years in stasis. She sat on the other side of him and their tails were intertwined. She met his gaze with deep affection. Although understandably shocked by all the events told to her after her release from stasis, she had accepted him and his love completely. She had said that, other than his slightly older looks, it didn't seem like even a day had passed in those twenty-five years.

''I'm ending this debate right here and now,'' announced Vosos Vos, standing up. ''Could you please hold her waist, Zah Kah'than?''

The Ophidian eased out into the floor, let go of his beloved, and wrapped his tail firmly around Clockwise Counterclockwise. Vosos Vos gripped the left shoulder of Clockwise Counterclockwise with his left hand. He was standing behind her. With his right hand, he found the device under her hair on the top of her head. He manipulated the controls of the device, releasing her from stasis. She sagged and would have fallen had not the two males been holding her up. She was fully conscious with eyes wide open in complete shock and dismay. She looked all around, taking in a complete view of the bar. Then she looked at those around the table, and the two ools that were holding her up.

''Zah Kah'than!'' she gasped, ''how did we get in this bar?'' Mist formed in her eyes.

The Ophidian's holohead reassured her soothingly: ''It's okay, Clockwise Counterclockwise; a few hours after our chat together, after I bought you the drink, you finished a dance and sat at a table near the back curtain. Bounty hunters stunned you and took you away. The ool sitting next to me at the bar is the same ool that is now holding your shoulders. He saw your last dance. He decided to try to rescue you, and I decided to help him. We tracked you here to this darkoid. You are now on the darkoid, Yoovellus.''

"Y-Y-oo-v-ell-us, the Forerunner darkoid?" mumbled Clockwise Counterclockwise, barely audible.

"Yes, the Forerunner darkoid," answered Zah Kah'than. "Please sit down in this chair. Please consider us to be your friends."

She sat down in the chair. The Ophidian made introductions. The last to be introduced was Vosos Vos who said: "Now sit still while we release Tilita."

No sooner had the Ophidian's tail surrounded Tilita's waist, than Vosos Vos turned off her stasis device.

She, too, would have fallen without the help of the two males. Tilita looked around with fright in her eyes.

"Who are you? Where is Pachacamac? Where is my grandmother? Where is Zan Fadron?" She had never seen an Ophidian before and looked down at the serpent in abject horror.

"Everything's all right, Tilita," soothed Finema Dova. "Please sit in this chair and we will explain everything to you. You're in Lapis Lazuli."

"L-L-a-p-i-s Lazuli," she whispered in a daze and sat in the offered chair.

They immediately introduced the two dazed Gentlefems to one another, and explained that they had been in stasis together. Tilita reached out for her hand. Clockwise Counterclockwise grasped the offered hand and did not release it. The feeling of friendship that passed between the two females was an almost tangible thing to the ools looking on.

For the next two hours everyone at the table joined in to welcome the two females back to reality, explain the events that had transpired, and to comfort the girls. After these two hours had passed, Vosos Vos said to them gently: "Now, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that legally you are both slaves. These are your slave papers." He took the papers out of his pocket and showed them.

"I am legally your owner. The good news is that I will draw up emancipation papers for you and give you your freedom as soon as I think that you have acclimated to this city and spaceport of Lapis Lazuli, and have adjusted to your situation to the point where you don't need my guardianship anymore."

During the next thirty minutes, they dwelled mainly on Tilita, trying to explain that the Zan Fadron and the Thovas Tho and the Solgat Sol, whom she had known, were nothing more than artificial simulations. They explained that the real Solgat Sol had died, but that the real Zan Fadron and the real Thovas Tho had been retrieved from slavery on the planet Zasp and brought to Yoovellus. No one around Tilita at the table could tell whether the poor girl was understanding a single word of what was being said. So they switched topics and talked about something else for a while.

Finema Dova asked of Vosos Vos: "So, did you find out what happened to the nine Quelsian Warships in orbit?"

"One second they were there," answered Vosos Vos, "and the next second they vanished. Two days later the admiral was delivered in chains to the office of Hoolk Venqueb, complements of an anonymous zenoc warlord in the outback. My guess is that the zenoc warlord is another O'fleptian. And by the way, Hoolk Venqueb has found the nest of the O'fleptian whose ship you saw destroyed by the Quelsians near Xorbeenus. The nest is on the other side of Yoovellus. Winged Vampires are guarding it, presumably waiting for the warlord to return home. Hoolk Venqueb doesn't think that the vampires know that the master and the master's ship are destroyed."

"I see that the real Thovas Tho and the real Zan Fadron have just walked in," announced Finema Dova. "I'll go get them." She promptly left the table, walked over to the two ools, greeted them, and brought them back with her to the table, introducing them to the two dazed girls. Thovas Tho held out his hand to Tilita, who refused to shake it.

Zan Fadron held out his hand to Tilita. Without a moment's hesitation, she gingerly reached out to grasp it. She would not let go of it. Tears formed in her eyes.

The original Zan Fadron spoke to her saying. "May I please sit beside you, Tilita?"

She nodded a silent, yes. The Ophidian surrendered his chair for another. The authentic Zan Fadron sat down beside her, still holding her hand. He spoke again to her saying: "Dearest Tilita, I am not the Zan Fadron that you knew in Botomatl. I will never be him. Since he was never alive, I think it's best to considered him to be dead and no more. However, I've downloaded his memories just as he downloaded mine. So, in me I have the memories of his experiences in Botomatl. Many ools would tell me that these memories of you in Botomatl are not real memories, but artificial ones, but Tilita, dearest, they feel real to me."

Tears began to form in his eyes. His hand, the one she was holding, trembled with sincerity and emotion.

"Would you be so kind, please, as to grant me the high honor of showing you around this wonderful city and spaceport of Lapis Lazuli tomorrow, the city of your ancestors, and of mine, prima?"

"Yes, primo" she whispered in reply, with drops of tears dripping down onto her blushed cheeks. Her beauty radiated around the table like the heat of a furnace.

All eyes around the table turned for a moment toward a woman who had walked up behind the real Thovas Tho. She paused for a moment, looking at the group around the table, with the deep scrutiny of a kindergarten teacher looking for pranksters in the classroom. This woman projected strength, intelligence and com-

petence; a woman accustomed to being in a position of command. She was not unattractive by any means. She wore her hair in a style widely known in the Zasp-Quelsian sphere of influence to be preferred by a large group of rustic miners on the darkoid, Fligsid. Of the ools at the table, only the original Thovas Tho was oblivious to her. She tapped him on the shoulder. She had mist in her eyes. Thovas Tho turned around and almost fainted.

"Ludia Faba! My beloved!" he gasped as he rose to be wrapped in her welcoming embrace. Tears were flowing down her face.

"My dear husband; at long last!" she uttered between sobs.

She had received the posted letters. Mailing the package of Thovas Tho's letters had been the last act before termination of Vosos Vos' Chameleon suit's avatar's doppelganger, known as Zan Fadron.

"Have you heard," asked Finema Dova of Vosos Vos. "I'm now a convicted felon. Hoolk Venqueb accused me, tried me, convicted me, and sentenced me, all in less than one Zaspian minute."

"Convicted of what?" asked Vosos Vos.

"Possession of stolen property. Do you remember my father's Forerunner relic?"

"The tachyon meter?"

"Yes," answered Finema Dova. "Hoolk Venqueb claimed my father stole it here."

"How did he find out you had it?"

"The Octopus told him. She downloaded our memories and then surveyed them, looking for pertinent data, which she reported to Hoolk Venqueb."

"What was the punishment?"

"Enslavement."

"Why aren't you a zombie now?"

"He pardoned me for my help in the invasion. Of course, I had to agree to certain conditions. I'm to continue my study of the tachyon meter until he decides otherwise. I must send him a copy of my father's report. I'm required to submit yearly reports myself. I had to acknowledge that Hoolk Venqueb was the owner, of course."

"He's one powerful ool!" exclaimed Vosos Vos.

"And now Darkools and offdarkoid Gentleools!" boomed the announcer on the stage, "it's now time for a very very special dance number. It's a three-ool dance. One of the three is an ool you well know. He's no stranger to this stage. We always enjoy seeing him dance on our stage. This time he's brought two special dance partners. These two special dance partners of his were free ools a few days ago. Today they are his slaves; very famous slaves, I might add. Yes, their owner

will be dancing alongside them. Their owner is also famous here on Yoovellus. His ancestor was once reading a science fiction novel from ancient Terra, entitled The Blind Spot by the ancient Terran authors, Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint. In this novel, this ancestor saw Hall's and Flint's theory that there might be two Ethers. This two-Ethers theory inspired this ancestor to go on a search that led to the discovery of the long-lost Forerunner artifacts which today we call the Zorquotropic Rings. The Zorquotropic Rings allowed Yoovellus to be found in the Alpha Ether, and then visited, explored, and settled. Now, centuries later, his descendent, who will dance for us in a moment, has just acquired the O'fleptian secrets of Beta Ether. Thus we finally now have proof that Hall's and Flint's ancient theory of two Ethers was correct after all. Just a few hours ago, I had a chat with this great hero, who is about to dance before you tonight. I expressed to him my best guess that such a web in space to capture starships would be impossible to be excreted from the body of one spider due to the astronomically great distances across a space lane, and the enormous volume of webbing that would be needed. He explained to me that the O'fleptians have invented a subquarkonic, almost instantaneously, self-replicating ethereal machine, tinier than an atom. Thus billions of these machines are quickly produced by the excreted webbing. Each machine pulls in ethereal substance and converts it into ethereal webbing with occasional nonethereal hooks. Such webbing lasts only a certain period of time. Then the webbing, hooks, and machines degenerate and dissolve harmlessly into the ether. What a marvelous new technology for us!

"For you offdarkoid Gentleools who are unfamiliar with our traditions here on the darkoid, Yoovellus, let me explain. We are dancing ools here. Dancing is our culture. It is our life blood. To become a citizen of Yoovellus, one must first dance on a Yoovellusian stage! This goes for slaves and free ools alike. Our letting these two slaves dance on our stage is our promise to them that some day we will grant their freedom! It is our traditional way of offering our welcome. So, give a huge round of applause for:

"The owner of the two slaves with whom he is dancing, the Zaspian, Hoolk Venqueb!

"His slave, the Quelsian Vice Admiral Fos Devas, who was the first ool in Zasp-Quelsian space to destroy a Tarantuloid Predatory Ship. He, and the nine starships he commanded, did this in response to a plea for help from the Xorbeenusian DMO, Gentlefem and Darkool, Finema Dova.

"And last but not least, Hoolk Venqueb's second slave, the O'fleptian, Deepspace Webmaster Fo'hex!"

Of course, Finema Dova herself was sitting in the audience, and the news that Vice Admiral Fos Devas was a slave had been very unwelcome in her heart, for she strongly felt that she owed a debt of gratitude to the Vice Admiral. She silently

promised herself to try to buy his freedom.

The spacerock music blasted into a new tune. The curtains parted. On the stage, the three ools gyrated, twisted, and stomped to the beat of the music. Throughout the entire nightclub, all eyes were riveted in awe on the three dancers. No one had ever seen a Nanotyranus, a Human, and a Tarantuloid dance together before. The deep meaning and reverential spirit of this time-honored, Yoovellusian tradition was applauded by all.